

God's Blind Eye

God's Blind Eye opens in a hotel in the Hague, where David Barnes, lonely and 'lost', is trying to recover from a serious drinking bout—and failing. He has lost his job, has got himself into debt, and is being pestered by a mysterious man called de Groot from the diamond markets of Amsterdam. By flashback the reader is then taken back to the immediate post-war years when Barnes was a Security Officer in Holland, and to his beautiful and sometimes cruel love affair with Jan, the young wife of a Dutch Army officer. *God's Blind Eye* shows the terror and aloneness of a man who is moving towards the fate which he subconsciously realises awaits him. It is a novel which poses the old and difficult question—should a man or woman squander years in a mental and physical vacuum for the sake of misplaced loyalty?

BOOKS BY
DOUGLAS BABER

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Love on the Verge

God's Blind Eye

DOUGLAS BABER

God's Blind Eye



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Whatever our relation may become to this world in which we have being, in our soul there will yet be more feelings, more passions, more secrets unchanged and unchanging, than there are stars that connect the earth, or mysteries fathomed by science.—

MAETERLINCK.

CHAPTER I

Barnes was afraid. He lay shivering beneath the bedclothes with his eyes fixed on the open window through which the sub-zero wind blew and chilled everything in the room. He longed for warmth, and all he had to do to get it was close the window and switch on the three-bar electric fire in the wall. Yet he couldn't. He was suffering from a dreadful inertia, an inertia that had kept him in this hotel bedroom all yesterday, not even leaving it to get himself something to eat, nor even ringing for the waiter to bring a tray to his room.

The truth was he did not dare ring for room-service in case he should remind the manager that he had been in the hotel for twelve days now and had made no move to settle his bill, or even tell them how long he intended to stay. He wondered for a moment how much he owed them, but the thought made him more frightened than ever so he put it from his mind. Or tried to. It wasn't as simple as that. He owed money everywhere-- the laundry, a local taxi-service, Otto's *estaminet* and at least two bars at Scheveningen. And what about his company office in Amsterdam, did he owe anything there?

The company office! That made him sit up in bed, shivering in his thin pyjamas, and trembling inside too, for he had had a letter from them three or four days ago. It was crumpled up in his jacket pocket now, scarcely read. There was no need to study it carefully, for he had known, as soon as he had seen the envelope, what it would contain.

The open slit of the window was light now, and he could tell from sounds deep in the bowels of the building that the staff were preparing the breakfasts: breakfasts for guests who could show their faces in the dining-room, who could settle their bills, had money in their pockets and had no need of a drink or

two in order to face the coming day.

Yet Barnes did not envy them. The predicament in which he now found himself seemed so inevitable; it had been threatening for years, he had been warned time and again, so what was the use of crying, now that it had arrived? But it was hard not to, dreadfully hard.

He stretched his arm behind him and fumbled for the light-cord. The bulb glowed and he screwed up his face as though he *was* weeping. He clasped his hands about his shaking knees and then, in an outburst of petty rage, jumped from the bed and switched on the three bars of the fire, as though he would have warmth in this place, even if they refused him everything else. Yet they had refused him nothing. The waiters were courteous and the manager affable. The hall porter treated him with respect, although he must have guessed there was something odd in the way Barnes came down at mid-day each morning, with shaking hands and watery eyes and asked hesitantly if there was any mail from England. He was always hesitant with a hang-over, unsure of himself, frightened about what he might have done or said on the previous night, scared that *somebody* would be after him. And if he went on like this, doubtless *somebody would*. You can't go on having black-outs night after night without doing something unpredictable in the end.

Then there was de Groot, hanging about the foyer, waiting to pounce on him when he came downstairs, asking the porter if he was awake, or asleep, ill or well. The staff must think it strange to see this man in his frayed black jacket perched on one of the chairs like a dusty vulture. . . .

As he sat hunched in the bed, waiting for the fire to warm the room, Barnes wondered if de Groot was down there at this moment, asking to see him in that querulous voice of his. He was ashamed of himself that he had anything to do with the man, but what was the alternative? de Groot was his last hope, the last chance to raise some money. He had sold his

watch two days previously, a solid gold Longines, for a hundred guilders, a measly ten pounds when it had cost him fifty. It was his last asset. With the watch gone he had nothing of value left, nothing at all.

The fire glowed in the wall. He felt its heat now, but before he could get really warm he would have to shut that window. He climbed from the bed and unsteadily crossed the room. The pile of the carpet was cold, and when he looked out of the window he saw that the square was covered in snow, and the towers of the Palace were rimed with frost which sparkled in the winter sun.

He managed to get the window shut, and with a feeling of trepidation opened his suit-case and took out the brandy-bottle. Disappointment clutched him like angry hands. It was empty, except for a few drips in the bottom which caught the light and seemed to mock him. The stale taste of cognac still clung to his palate, so he must have finished it the night before. He couldn't remember drinking it. In fact he could have sworn that it had been a quarter full. Surely, even though drunk, an instinctive caution should have warned him to save a little for the morning—his weapon with which to face the new day, the means to give himself some sort of self-assurance?

He seized the neck of the bottle with a kind of desperation, then dropped it back in the suit-case and collapsed weakly on the bed. He hadn't sufficient courage yet to feel in his pockets and see how much remained of his hundred guilders. After selling the watch he had gone to some bar or other, had had a number of drinks and had purchased two bottles of cognac. This was the second. The first he had drunk yesterday morning and had hidden the bottle behind the lavatory-seat in the toilet down the corridor, in case the staff should have found too many empties in his room and reported to the manager.

Again an ineffectual rage possessed him. He clenched and unclenched his teeth and muttered furiously, "The manager, the manager, what's it got to do with him, the swine? I'm a

guest, aren't I? If I have a drink in my room it isn't anything to do with him, it's my affair . . . the manager. . . ."

And all the manager had ever done was bow politely and smile and ask him if he was quite comfortable!

His rage left him as quickly as it had come. His throat burned, and he had severe pains in the pit of his stomach. Acidity, he supposed, or wind. He had had nothing to eat for three days, only plenty to drink. The spirits were probably burning the walls of his stomach, with nothing solid going down to absorb them. 'Well,' he thought, 'I wish to God I had something to burn my guts with now.'

He pulled the pillows from the bed and sat on them on the floor by the fire. Out in the corridor footsteps went past, and cutlery clinked. Breakfast was being carried to some room. Then what time was it? Seven o'clock, eight? He had been awake since dawn, and the hours had seemed endless. It could be lunch-time, for all he knew. No, not lunch-time. He was fooling himself in thinking such a thing. If it were as late as that he could have rung for a drink, and his request wouldn't have seemed peculiar. But asking for brandy before the breakfasts were served! Even he had not the gall for that.

Leaning over, Barnes dragged his jacket from the chair. He fumbled for cigarettes and matches and tossed the jacket back. He didn't want to find out how much money remained, not yet. Neither did he wish to touch that crumpled letter and see again the disastrous typed lines. Later, when he had had a few cognacs to quieten his twitching nerves, when he soothed those shooting pains in his stomach and his hands were steadier, then he would investigate the money position and read his company's letter properly. Later . . .

He lit a cigarette and immediately started to cough, a hacking paroxysm which doubled him up on the bed. His lungs felt as though they had been seared by flame. Sweat stood out on his forehead and he buried his face in the pillow. The pain in his lungs and stomach made him want to vomit.

CHAPTER 2

de Groot parked his dilapidated Fiat by the railed-in trees in the centre of the square and looked gloomily at the ice which shone on the cobbles like a coat of varnish. Some of the cars had chains on their wheels and went by with a *tick-tick* that made his teeth stand on edge. He had driven up from Amsterdam without any breakfast and the cold had gone right through him. He wanted at all costs to catch Barnes before he left the hotel; that was why he had left early without bothering to wait for food. The day before yesterday he had come up about lunch-time, only to find that the bird had flown. And on his return his chief had given him a good slating, as though it was *his* fault that Barnes should go out drinking.

de Groot's mean little soul had wilted under the slating; he hadn't dare defend himself; all he had been able to do was take it out of his wife in the evening until she had grown sick of his alternating tempers and complaints and had left the house to stay with friends. So nobody had been at home to give him anything to eat, not even a mug of coffee.

He blew in his hands to warm them and all the time kept a wary eye on the hotel entrance on the opposite side of the square. There came a series of metallic pings from the engine as it cooled in the freezing air. A neon sign in the window of a café advertised coffee and hot *croissants* and he wondered if he might chance going in for a few minutes and get something to warm him. By taking a table near the door the white steps of the hotel would be in view, so it would be simple enough to catch Barnes if he came out. . . .

de Groot climbed from the car and locked the door. His locking it meant nothing. Neither the driving window nor the

window in the passenger door closed properly. Both would push down easily enough from the outside did anyone wish to steal the car. It was just another of de Groot's tedious habits, like the way he polished his knife and fork on the restaurant table-cloth, flicked cigarette ash in the turn-ups of his trousers, or picked his nose.

He chose a table by the door and removed his overcoat. The material had been black once, but now it had a greenish tinge about it and the fur collar had bare patches, like a head of hair with a scalp disease. His striped trousers had a shine on them and the cuffs of his black jacket were frayed. de Groot never did anything about smartening himself up. Poverty was no sin, he always said, and displayed its evidence like a beggar showing his sores.

"We're cleaning up these tables," the waitress said. "Would you care to take one nearer the stove?"

"No, I wouldn't. I'm quite comfortable here."

She eyed him distastefully. "What can I get you?"

"Coffee and a cognac."

"The patron hasn't yet opened up the spirit cupboard. . . ."

"Then tell him to open it," de Groot answered testily. He was a paying customer; here was someone he could bully. "And tell him I'm in a hurry. I have my business to attend to, even if he hasn't."

The place smelt of salami and garlic and fresh-ground coffee. The proprietor hurried out in an apron and wished him good morning. de Groot ignored him. He had had his little triumph in here, had shown who was the master, and that was enough to be going on with. Anyway, his thoughts had switched themselves to that hotel over the square, and to Barnes. He must catch him today, that was certain. If he went back to Amsterdam again without an answer his chief might throw him out on his neck, and that would mean virtual starvation.

de Groot had no illusions about himself, he knew that if he

lost this job it would be his last association with the diamond business, and precious stones were the only thing he knew anything about. His father had been a diamond broker and had brought him up in the trade. When it became obvious that he had no business head at all, his father had him trained in diamond-cutting. For years he had worked in one or another of the Amsterdam cutting workshops, until he had become involved with a woman and had stolen stones to pay his debts. His father had warded off criminal proceedings by settling things up with his employers, and had then washed his hands of him. Afterwards he was on the black-list of every reputable diamond merchant, and since then had hung about on the fringe of the trade, picking up bits of information here and there, buying and selling bad quality stones at just enough profit to live on.

He also received a small retainer by Hendrik van Dijk, his present chief, to ferret out bits of gossip from dealers in precious stones, and this he did to perfection. He poked and pried in the bars and cafés on the water-front and along the Amsterdam back-streets like a dog nosing out scraps from the dust-bins. If valuable stones were smuggled in on one of the ships in port, it wasn't long before de Groot got to know about it. If key men were promoted in the trade, he knew almost before the board-room doors opened.

But it was a risky game. His boss was engaged in the illicit diamond traffic—industrial stones, stones from the pawn-shops of Paris, Berlin, Brussels, the Hague, and occasionally diamonds from fences, cut-down or re-set, smuggled from frontier to frontier to end up as quite legitimate stones on the big markets of London and Amsterdam. Nobody knew where they originally came from, nobody wanted to know. Each took his cut and passed them on to the next man. Except de Groot. All he received was the fifty guilders thrown at him each Friday across the glass-topped desk in his chief's office.

The waitress set a cup on the table, with a little silver

percolator perched on its rim. de Groot sipped his cognac while the coffee dripped through into the cup.

"What's the time?"

The woman jerked her head at the wall. "There's the clock."

It was nearly ten o'clock. Then where was Barnes? Still in his room, recovering from yet another drinking bout? de Groot frowned. He wanted not only to catch him, but to catch him sober. Twice he had spoken to Barnes when he had been half-drunk, and the meetings had been a waste of time. He couldn't understand why his chief wanted to employ him. It seemed the height of madness to use an alcoholic on that sort of mission, or on any mission for that matter. de Groot had come in contact with alcoholics before, he knew how unpredictable they were, how the sight of a bottle of spirits could swerve them from any course.

He removed the percolator from his cup and sipped the coffee. It was burning hot. He called to the girl, "Bring me some cold milk, and my bill at the same time."

Beads of moisture ran down the insides of the café windows and through them the hotel entrance on the far side of the square looked as though it was gently swaying. He poured cold milk in the coffee and gulped it down. He paid his bill and smiled at the girl as though to make up for his truculence. Her lips gave an answering twitch, coldly. He didn't have much success with women, not even with the woman he had married. His only real victory had been with the anæmic girl he had found in Utrecht years before, and she had cost him his father's protection, his job and his reputation.

He left his car where it was and crossed the square. The rubber soles of his overshoes crunched in the frozen snow. Over the Palace a flag hung limply on the frost-rimed mast. So the Queen and Prince Bernhardt were home. De Groot's lips curled. With their money he would be down in the south of France somewhere, away from the bite of the winter, from

scrounging round the cess-pits of Amsterdam, and away from his chief, Hendrik van Dijk!

He envied Bernhardt his power and his money, his ability to fly off in his aeroplane whenever he chose. And he envied his chief too, although he hated him. Hatred of van Dijk was something of a luxury to de Groot. He nursed it inside him the way others nurse a precious memory, praying that one day in the future fate might deal him an ace and give him an advantage over his superior. Even in van Dijk's presence, when he bowed and smiled his saccharine smile, he stoked up the hatred secretly, telling himself what he would do to this man who openly despised him and threw his pay over the desk like thirty pieces of silver, given the chance. But the satisfaction from these musings never lasted long. Deep in his heart he knew that if the opportunity arose to do van Dijk some injury he would never have the courage.

Inside the hotel it was warm and comfortable, with the sort of comfort only the very rich can afford. de Groot removed his greasy homburg and approached the hall porter's desk.

"The English gentleman, Mr Barnes, is he in?"

The hall porter glanced at the row of keys behind him and raised his eyebrows to the ceiling.

"He hasn't been down for breakfast?"

"You had better ask the *maître d'hôtel*," the porter answered and, as on previous occasions, asked himself what this shifty little man could possibly want with the Englishman. To dun him? Surely not. Barnes was always generous with his money. He tipped well and never complained, and in some peculiar way he aroused pity amongst the staff. He was rarely sober, but they were accustomed to guests like that, particularly single Americans on leave from one or other of the European garrisons. No, it was due to the fact that Barnes seemed so lonely. He drifted about in a kind of alcoholic twilight, dulling his senses with spirits as though trying to escape from himself. He was never belligerent or morose, but drink didn't

seem to elevate him as it did others. It simply gave him a jaded look, as though sleep were about to claim him at any moment. He drank too much alone, of course. The whole hotel knew how much brandy he got through up there in his room. One had only to see the wine-waiter hurrying up the stairs with a cognac bottle to know where he was going.

"Can you ring his room and tell him I'm here?"

"He doesn't like to be disturbed in the mornings," the porter said, and added tersely, as though protecting Barnes, "In a good hotel such as this the wishes of our guests are the first consideration."

The telephone on the desk tinkled! The porter lifted the receiver, glanced at de Groot, then turned his back on him and spoke quietly into the instrument, "Yes, sir, of course . . . yes, yes, I will order him up at once . . . it is ten-thirty exactly . . . no, no trouble at all." The porter turned back and dropped the receiver in its cradle. He signalled a page. "Ask the wine-waiter to go up to number twelve . . . at once, boy, understand?"

de Groot was almost certain he had been speaking to Barnes. Who else would want the wine-waiter at ten-thirty in the morning? Number twelve. Twice before he had tried to find out Barnes's room number, without success.

"So he's in?" he said. "Did he say he wanted to see me?"

"I beg your pardon. . . ."

"I know it was Barnes on the telephone. Did he say he would be down . . . or ask me to go up?"

"Neither."

"Then I'll wait," de Groot sidled over the carpeted foyer to an arm-chair which faced the staircase. The porter watched him for a moment or two, then shrugged his shoulders and busied himself sorting the mail and poking it in various pigeon-holes.

'Bastard,' de Groot thought. 'Who does he think he is?' *In a good hotel such as this.* . . . Had the words held an oblique

accusation? If they had, the accusation had found its mark. de Groot didn't know what the inside of a good hotel felt like, he never had; except on occasions such as this, sitting in one of the chairs waiting for someone, treated as a trespasser by guests and staff alike, looked at as though his place was at the back door with the chauffeurs and valets."

•He lit a cigarette and waited. Those guests who had had a late breakfast began to come out of the dining-room. They mooched round the foyer, studied the theatre and cinema programmes or sat smoking and talking, as though reluctant to go out in the air which pinched the ears and the tips of the nostrils. de Groot hitched up his trousers and attempted to convey the impression of an impoverished gentleman quite at home in such elegant surroundings. His act was wasted. The well-dressed men and their sleek, perfumed women scarcely gave him a glance, or if they did, their eyes dropped to the floor beside him, expecting to see the parcel he had come to deliver.

de Groot retaliated. When the hall porter's eyes were next on him he deliberately flicked his ash on the rich blue carpet. It lay there, a grey speck the size of a halfpenny, his preposterous challenge to the world he envied.

CHAPTER 3

Barnes was feeling a little better. He had drunk three cognacs and now lay in the bath, waiting for the hot water to relax his taut nerves.

After the third brandy he had summoned up enough courage to order half a bottle. It stood on a chair beside the bath, and every now and then he took a small nip, holding it in his mouth for a few moments before swallowing it. It burned the inside of his cheeks, but when it reached his stomach the burn had gone and he felt a warm glow, a sense of tranquillity, a false peace.

But he was rationing himself this morning, filled with the strongest determination to cut down his drinking, and to eat. Food was what he needed, and there did come a time in each day when he felt hungry. Yet he always spoiled it by going on drinking until the appetite was lost, and after that, of course, he didn't care whether he had food or not.

Today would be different, just as he had intended that countless other days would be different. This time he meant it, for he had a lot to do. To start with, there was his laundry. When he felt better able to face things, once the brandy had soothed those shooting pains and steadied his hand a bit, he would gather his soiled linen, list it and give it to the chambermaid. Then he would count his money, read that ominous letter from his company and finally decide what he was to do.

He began to shave in the bath. As he had expected, de Groot was below. He had guessed that from the hall porter's quiet voice over the telephone. What the devil did the man want? He had had drinks with him in one or other of the Amsterdam bars, and had vague recollections of some

proposition, but he didn't really know what the fellow was after.

The razor-blade was new, yet it felt as though it was tearing the bristles from his chin. He winced, and his eyes filled with water. He remembered that he hadn't shaved for three days; that would account for the pain.

de Groot, de Groot, de Groot. Had he heard the name before? He seemed to recollect that the fellow was in some way connected with the diamond business, just as he was. But how? With what firm? And in what capacity?

Barnes's own job was simple enough. He had been brought to Holland on a buying trip by his sales-director because he spoke fluent Dutch, it was as simple as that. And he was supposed to entertain the Dutch dealers, soften them up so that Davidson could step in and buy cheap. But he could have sworn that this de Groot had never attended one of the cocktail parties. Then it must have been in one or other of the dives he frequented after the parties. He never could bear to spend the evenings with Davidson, but had to clear off by himself and get more to drink, and shake off those pasty, over-fed dealers who talked nothing but business, business.

And Davidson was just as bad. He lived for his company, was married to it, and had no time for anything but what he called sharp deals, and sales, and publicity. The company of Charles Sivieloos to which both he and Barnes belonged was his whole life, nothing else really mattered, not even his hard-faced, exquisitely gowned wife, dragged along to amuse the wives of his Dutch colleagues, and who sat in a corner by herself, showing off her rings and pendants and drinking one gin after another.

Barnes detested her, particularly when she spoke in that over-cultured voice of hers and looked at the Dutch dealers and their wives as though they were a kind of private circus provided for her entertainment, to be sneered at and joked about and abandoned when she had had enough.

She was bored to tears, that was the trouble, with too much money and time on her hands. When her husband *deared* her and *darlinged* her, as he did in public, the platitudes fell from his lips with no feeling at all, as though he were addressing a rather temperamental actress. One almost expected to see him give his guests a surteptitious wink and raise his eyebrows in mock despair. Perhaps he did, with that rather revolting conceit of his. Barnes doubted if they had slept together for years. It was impossible to imagine Davidson's arrogance and her ennui ever breaking down to the grotesque abandonment of the love act.

Once she had wanted to accompany Barnes on one of his excursions to the cafés on the Amsterdam water-front. He had shied away from the subject like a bird before the beater. It was bad enough to get tipsy at the official parties, which he invariably did, and sheer off when Davidson invited some of the guests to dinner, without provoking him further by taking his wife and leaving him quite alone to entertain his beloved dealers.

Barnes climbed from the bath and wrapped himself in a towel, then went in the bedroom and fished about for a cigarette. This was the time of day when he was more or less contented. The cognac had restored a little of his self-confidence, so much so that he had firmly put the cork back in the bottle. He could enjoy his cigarette without that dreadful cough hacking away in his lungs. And he even found dressing a pleasure. There was still a clean shirt in the drawer, and the fresh smell of it, its crispness as it enveloped him was almost a sensual pleasure. He wouldn't mind having a girl with him now. At this very moment. If she were lovely enough, the sight of her body on the bed there would excite him, and he hadn't felt excited for a very long time. He would make the intercourse last a long time, he had always been able to do that when he had a certain amount of drink in his system, and afterwards, when the passion was spent, he would feel calmer

and less nervy; for him it had always been like that. But it would have to be *now*; the afternoon or evening would be too late. By then he would have had too much to drink for sex to interest him, or even if it did he would be incapable of gratifying his limp desires.

But with his stomach pains gone, the cool shirt against his body after the bath and the sight of the brandy-bottle like an old friend by the dressing-table, he fancied a girl in whom he might escape from the loneliness and depression which only brandy held at bay. Yet when the effects of the alcohol wore off, the sense of impending disaster and loneliness was far worse, crouched in his mind like an enemy.

He fumbled in his back pocket for his money and counted it. Seventy guilders and a few odd cents. Seven pounds. At least he had sufficient to go out with and buy himself a few drinks and a good meal. Surely, by then, with food to strengthen his nerves, he would be capable of formulating *some* sort of plan? He would have to leave this hotel, that was certain. It was one of the most costly in the Hague, and he couldn't for the life of him think what had possessed him to come here in the first place. All he remembered was that he had been drinking in Amsterdam with Davidson some time earlier—seven days, eight, perhaps more—and had become bored beyond endurance. He had come to on this bed, fully clothed with his packed suit-cases at its foot. What had driven him here? Nostalgia? Probably, for he knew the Hotel de la Poste well, had stayed here with Jan after the war, before she went off to join her husband in the East Indies.

Whatever the motives had been, he was here and owed a great deal of money which he couldn't pay. His next move must be to find some way of settling the bill and clearing out. He had no plans at the moment, particularly with that letter burning a hole in his pocket . . . which he would read again later. . . .

He bundled up his laundry and gave it to the chambermaid. Then he took two good pulls from the brandy-bottle and hurried downstairs as though he were a man of affairs, with something important to do.

CHAPTER 4

The porter was a little taken aback by Barnes's brisk air, but his eyes betrayed him. An old hand at reading men's faces, the porter recognised every sign in the eyes or mouth that spoke of achievement or failure. It was part of his job. On his unspoken congratulation or commiseration depended the size of his tips. The red spider's web of lines on Barnes's eyeballs told their own story, as did the slight tic which twitched at the side of his mouth.

"Good morning, good morning," Barnes said heartily, and the brandy-fumes drifted over the desk. "Any mail from England this morning?"

The porter shook his head, as he did every morning. "There never was any English mail. "There is . . . a person here to see you, Mr Barnes."

Barnes nodded absently and stuck a cigarette in his mouth. The porter held out a match. Again no news from Margaret or the children. He had written her . . . when was it? . . . two months back. Yes, he had dropped her a line the day after he got the job with Charles Siviecloos, to tell her that from now on things would be different, he wouldn't have to drink any more because he had at last found a job that interested him. And for the first five weeks he had *not* drunk. He had eaten proper meals, slept eight hours a night and had given satisfaction in his work. Then one night, a few beers at Knightsbridge . . . loneliness again, because Margaret and the children were no longer with him, he must return to cold rooms, old ashes in the grate, the unmade bed, dirty dishes in the sink, and silence, silence. The next night he had a few more beers, believing that he could handle them, but towards

the end of the week beer was no longer strong enough and he went back to spirits. After that, alcohol had claimed him once more. He drank at lunch-times, then early in the bleak morning, covering up his breath with peppermint, hiding it from his superiors. . . .

Something tugged at his sleeve. Bony, nicotine-stained fingers, nails with dirt under them that showed up like poison, grasped his sleeve. "Mr Barnes . . . ah, how do you do, Mr Barnes," de Groot almost whispered. "I called yesterday, but . . ." he jerked his head accusingly at the hall porter, ". . . they told me you had a previous engagement."

Barnes smiled gratefully at the uniformed figure behind his desk. He had spared him this yesterday, at any rate. And he felt more able to cope today. The porter gave an answering twitch of the lips and then turned discreetly away. de Groot's eyes blinked eagerly behind the thickest horn-rimmed spectacles Barnes had ever seen. The black pupils expanded and contracted like feeding maggots. His sleeve was twitched again.

"Perhaps if we were to take a little walk, have a drink in one of the bars. This hotel, Mr Barnes . . . it isn't easy to talk business here. . . ."

Luxury, wealth, the atmosphere of well-bred people, they had their effect on de Groot. He was uncertain of himself, like a poor swimmer out of his depth.

The moth-eaten collar and greasy homburg made Barnes hesitate. It wouldn't inspire confidence in hotels or bars where he owed money to be seen in such company.

"Where do you suggest we go?"

"I have a car outside," de Groot explained in his hoarse whisper. "Anywhere you fancy, Meinheer."

That was better; they could at least get away from the Hague, where he might be recognised. It was astonishing how quickly you became known in a small foreign city, especially if you ran about running up bills on the strength of staying at

the de la Poste and being a foreigner here on business. It was a confidence trick, really. Barnes had often wondered how confidence men had had the nerve to do it, and here he was, playing the game on a reduced scale, a scale sufficient to fill himself with enough drink to ensure a night's sleep, not lie awake through the black hours, with the devils crouched on his chest terrifying him. . . .

He fetched his hat and coat from the cloakroom and they went out to the Fiat. The starter screeched several times before the engine rattled on its worn cylinders.

"Let's go out to Scheveningen," Barnes suggested. It wouldn't matter so much being seen with de Groot there. It had a mixed floating population, like Brighton.

"There won't be much open at this time of the year," de Groot warned.

"Who cares?" Barnes asked. He was already cold and had his hands clenched in his overcoat pockets. Exhaust fumes from the loose engine swirled inside from under the dashboard. He added morosely, "It will be a day by the sea, anyway."

They drove out along the straight, red-bricked road, flanked on either side by trees as orderly and straight as soldiers. The sun gleamed on the icy bricks and made it difficult to see in front of them. De Groot clipped tinted lenses over his glasses, and wiped the cracked, yellow windscreen with his sleeve.

"It is such a great pleasure to meet you again. I was so disappointed when I failed to see you yesterday, and so was my employer, Mr van Dijk."

"Who is Mr van Dijk?" Barnes asked without interest. He spoke Dutch, although de Groot had been using English. He felt there was an indefinable advantage in speaking the fellow's own language.

de Groot put just the right amount of surprise in his voice. "Mr van Dijk, you have never heard of him? He is a very

well known gentleman in the diamond trade. Very respected. As you would say in England . . .” De Groot paused to fumble in his mind for the colloquialism, then added in triumph, “. . . the hall-mark of respectability.”

Barnes scarcely heard what he said. He too was rummaging in his mind for a clue as to where he had met this man before. Where he had met him wasn't important; the importance lay in the fact that he could not recall it. These mental gaps were growing more frequent, just as the numbness in his fingers and legs was more marked. A form of arthritis caused by alcohol, he had been told. Mental and physical arthritis. As for this de Groot, he could have bumped into him in a dozen places—in one or another of the shady Amsterdam night-clubs, perhaps with one of the diamond buyers, though he doubted that. The buyers with whom his firm dealt were hardly likely to have a man like this tagging along with them.

The sun lit up the ice like cracked glass. It gave Barnes a pain behind the eyes, and as the old Fiat drove into Scheveningen Barnes said, “If we must talk, let's stop at one of the bars and have a drink.”

de Groot gave an understanding little smile which infuriated him. He had not wanted to admit to the Dutchman that he needed a drink so badly. In fact he had been clenching his hands in his overcoat pockets, fighting the desire, and fighting the ugly pains which stabbed at the walls of his stomach and seemed to twist right down to his bowels. Driving along the iced road to Scheveningen he had tried to will de Groot to make the suggestion about stopping for a drink, and instead he had weakened. In this small way he had again betrayed himself.

“In winter many of the smaller bars shut up,” de Groot said, as though conducting a tour. “There's so little business, they take the opportunity to close for repairs, decorations, for a holiday period. But the Kurhaus will be open. . . .”

Without realizing it he was speaking, Barnes said harshly,

"No, not the Kurhaus. Any other place, but not the Kurhaus."

de Groot gave him a curious look. He sensed the depth of emotion behind that harshness. He was curious, but not yet sure enough of his man to start his nasty little probings. He drove on, past the big hotel, and the sight of its name-board, clear in the winter sunshine, gave Barnes a clutch of pain in his heart, just as the sound of it on de Groot's lips had done. The Kurhaus. *The Kurhaus*. How long ago was it since he had been here so happily, so full of that recklessness which had made him so contented? Five years? Six? Yes, at least six years, and since then his life had crumpled like an empty paper bag, had collapsed into the ragged thing it was today. The Kurhaus . . . Noordwijk . . . Katwijk . . . silently he mouthed the names to himself, looking for the old magic, but the magic had gone, gone. Now they were merely places on the map, small coastal towns, shabby and uninteresting as the little man at his side. But in the old days, with Jan, the magic had been there . . . Noordwijk, Katwijk, the Kurhaus . . . after all, they *were* the milestones of the journey through a sublime sort of happiness, a stormy happiness, so *something* of their exquisite quality should remain. But no, nothing at all. When you came back, they were smaller and shabbier, and dead. The return was a mistake, like going back to the bed of a woman who had lost her power to move you, all that remained were the faults, the blemishes, habits and mannerisms which jarred the nerves.

De Groot had stopped the car and was pointing to a small *bistro* on the left. Barnes climbed out of his seat and his thoughts untangled themselves from the past. But it was a slow and difficult process. Once, his mind would have snapped back to the present, quick and clean as a flashing knife. Now it took time, with that mental arthritis numbing them, always numbing.

Barnes slammed the car door and clenched and unclenched his senseless hands. It was snowing again, the still air filled

with the flutter, flutter of white, cold half-petals which settled on his mouth and absurdly on de Groot's fleshy, Jewish-looking nose. The *bistro* was empty, save for the white-jacketed waiters whose energy appeared to have departed with last season's tourists. Barnes sat at a table, and the Dutchman insinuated his shabby person into the opposite chair, as though apologising for being there at all.

Mechanically Barnes said to the waiter, "A large cognac and soda, and a few nuts, something salty," then, as an after-thought to de Groot, "You'll have something?"

"Geneva, if you please," and with another gesture of apology, he added, "I like cognac of course, but we Dutch, we love our Geneva, just like the English love their whisky and soda or their beer."

The snow had melted on his nose and gathered in a drop. Barnes had an almost uncontrollable desire to take those fleshy nostrils in his finger and thumb and twist them.

The bar was cold. de Groot rubbed his hands together, the yellowish nails with their poison-tips scrape-scraping on the dry skin. "Ah, Mr. Barnes, very cosy indeed. It's so good to get away from the Hague and Amsterdam for a change. It gives one quite a holiday feeling, a sense of being free." He sniffed appreciatively at the dusty, stale tobacco-alcohol-laden air. ". . . And the smell of the sea . . . lovely, lovely . . . quite relaxing. . . ."

When the drinks came and Barnes lifted his glass to his mouth, he found to his surprise that his hands were quite steady. And when he had chewed a few nuts his appetite stirred. But he wanted to get rid of this man. By himself he could drink quietly, then have a light meal, something tasty, and perhaps sleep during the afternoon. Then he would feel a little better, stronger, and perhaps start thinking again, plan some sensible course of action that would get him back to England. Back home. But what for? What purpose would going home serve? Still, sometime or other he *must* go, and

above all, must clear himself of debt to the hotel and leave with a little dignity.

de Groot ordered him a second cognac and, as usual, the spirit anæsthetised the stomach pains.

Bluntly he asked, "I don't see why you shouldn't tell me just what you want? The porter at the hotel told me you've been asking for me once or twice during the past few days. Why?"

de Groot was a little taken aback by this abrupt approach. Like the Chinese, he preferred the indirect method, oblique references to the subject, guarded chit-chat in order to prepare for the serious business. But Barnes was having none of that. He didn't feel well enough, and the shiny trousers, the diseased fur collar and, above all, those pouting nostrils, irritated him. After all, his nerves were unpredictable enough after the drinking bout without having to expect them to cope with this sort of outrage.

The Dutchman removed his thick spectacles and cleaned them, puff-puffing at the lenses, blinking his watery eyes.

"My employer wishes me to invite you to Amsterdam to meet him. He is most anxious to make your acquaintance."

"Why?"

"Ah, why?" de Groot repeated. "Impossible for me to say, Meinheer, but when he wishes to meet someone it is generally worth their while. Perhaps he wishes to offer you employment . . . that is possible, for we know you have much experience in the diamond business. Experts are rare, as you well know. It isn't the trade it used to be, and good men fetch a high price. Yes, it is possible he wishes to offer you employment."

"Employment? I have a perfectly good job." Barnes lifted his eyes and looked at his companion. A perfectly good job? The unread letter in his pocket seemed to crackle, and he wondered if the Dutchman heard it too.

de Groot leaned his head to one side and sniffed at his fur collar, as though recalling the perfume of a bygone mistress. "Is that so, now is that really a fact? And we . . ." again the

air of apology, "that is . . . my employer, was under the impression you had recently left the company of Charles Sivieloos, but perhaps he has been misinformed. It's possible. The strangest rumours get around the diamond business, many of them most unreliable."

Barnes was a little shocked. In some period of ghastly black-out, during that famous mental arthritis, had he opened his mouth too wide? Had he admitted in public that Charles Sivieloos had sacked him? Surely not, for he had not really admitted the fact to himself yet. Still, this man knew, and what did it really matter?

"And if I have left my firm, so what? What has it to do with you?"

"Nothing to do with me," de Groot said hastily, "but you may rest assured that my employer only wishes to meet you from the highest motives. He is the hall-mark of respectability, as I mentioned before." de Groot savoured the phrase and decided that he liked it. "Yes, the absolute hall-mark, and if he wishes to see you, I should certainly visit him. Allow me to advise you on this point, Meinheer, I feel so sure it will be to your advantage. He treats everyone so well, so generously . . ." he smiled his loose, saccarine smile, recalling the soiled guilders tossed over the desk at the end of each week, the sneers, his own humiliation.

Barnes ordered another round of drinks and paid for them out of his diminishing roll of notes. He would certainly have to have some sort of employment, or the Dutch might have him arrested. Debts weren't appreciated here any more than in any other country.

"When does he want me to go?" Barnes asked.

"Today?" de Groot asked eagerly. "The sooner the better, Mr Barnes."

"Not today," Barnes answered. He wanted those solitary drinks, the slow meal, and . . . and . . . yes, he wanted the memories, too, memories which this little trip to Scheveningen

had stirred. The Kurhaus shining back there in the weak mid-day sun. He *needed* the memories now, as though to fortify himself against the coming bleak weeks. And they were stirring. Stronger now than for many years. Noordwijk, Katwijk . . . and *The Round House*. Ah, he hadn't thought about *that* for so long. The Round House outside the Hague, with rooms that reminded him of a lighthouse, so round they were, so comforting and exciting, and safe. They had been cut off there, Jan and he, in a remote world of their own between those round walls and the trembling walls of their own crazed passion. The Round House, with the pebble drive and the tall, heavy-boughed trees with the white-painted front door smiling through the trunks. . . .

"Then tomorrow? I will be pleased to drive up from Amsterdam and pick you up. If you care to pack your luggage we can find you a hotel there. It would be nearer, more convenient for you, you understand . . ."

But now, with those recollections crowding back, bringing a little of the magic, yes, containing a *touch* of the old magic, he didn't want to leave the Hague. In fact, he wouldn't. He must stay, hire a car, perhaps, and drive along the coast, drive to the dunes near Noordwijk and see again the gales snatching the dune-tops, whisking the sand like mares' tails.

Barnes rose to his feet. "Tomorrow or the next day, it's all the same to me. But not my luggage. I'll stay in my hotel. If you want me to go to Amsterdam, all well and good, but I return to the Hague."

de Groot was not prepared to press him. He had won a victory in getting Barnes to agree to accompany him to his employer. He flicked two inches of dark ash from his cigarette into his trouser turn-up and ordered a final drink. Barnes gulped his down and went out into the fluttering ice-petals to the car.

When de Groot dropped him at his hotel, Barnes neither asked him in nor said good-bye.

CHAPTER 5

As he passed the porter's desk Barnes asked, without hope, the usual question, "Any mail from England?" but the porter didn't bother to look in the letter-rack. He shook his head and asked in return, "Shall I tell the *maitre d'hôtel* you will be down for lunch, Meinheer?"

Barnes glanced at the hall clock, hesitating. It was twenty minutes past one. "I have some letters to write . . . perhaps I'll have lunch later . . . I'll ring down. . . ."

But he had no intention of eating yet. The hunger he had felt at Scheveningen had passed. All he needed was a couple of drinks and then he would go to bed for the afternoon. Later, at about six, he would have another bath, take a few apéritifs and go out for a meal. The hotel food didn't appeal to him. They catered for the mundane palates of tourists and it had about it the stodginess of roast beef and two veg. which he had so detested in England.

He liked highly seasoned foods on top of brandy, and he knew exactly where he could get it. Now that his memory had been re-awakened he found that he could recollect quite clearly a number of rather special places which he had frequented with Jan, small, quiet restaurants which somehow the tourists never got to hear about—for example, a night-club he and Jan had always thought of as *their* place, where a negro pianist played the blues with such emotion that his face contorted like a man in agony and the sweat dribbled down his cheeks as though the clock had been turned back and he was a slave once more, the iron biting his ankles and wrists as, lost and hopeless, he dragged his way to the plantation. Then there was the tiny bar outside the Hague, close to her Round

House, with its old red velvet seats and the two old men playing their interminable game of billiards. . . .

The chambermaids had done out his room, and his brandy-bottle stood beside the water-carafe on the bedside table like an accusation. Barnes poured himself a stiff measure, lit a cigarette and sat on the bed staring vacantly at the snow-flakes dancing crazily outside the windows. As he sipped his cognac it suddenly occurred to him how absurd it had been to ask for English mail at the desk. Who was there in England to write to him? Only his head office, and he already had a letter from *them* in his pocket! Margaret? Hardly. She preferred not to hear from him, so why write and encourage an answer? In any case, he never wrote to her now. His life with her was over and done with. Dead. To resurrect it, even in the mind, only brought the stench of decomposition, a stench to blemish the memory of what had been between them before the death. That is, if there had been any memories worth while. With Margaret there had been none, none at all. Their union had been a mistake, for they had never lived alike, or had common thoughts to share. It had been a kind of vacuum in which they had floated, without passion, or fire, or any deep emotions, not even the emotion of hate in the later stages. The trouble was, he had liked her but had not loved her and she, he knew, had loved him but had not liked him. There had existed merely an attachment created by the marriage lines—a slender thread upon which they went through the years like tight-rope walkers, unsure, at times unbalanced, half aware that sooner or later friction must wear through that thread and it would snap. Well, it had. Now he must face it. He was alone in life now, left entirely to his own devices, and his own device, it seemed, was drink. He couldn't live with it, yet he couldn't live without it. First Jan, then alcohol, had thrown him into another world, half real, half a dream, a world of fears and grotesque images, of fuddled memory and the hopeless stirrings of impossible desires.

CHAPTER 6

An hour later found Barnes still seated on the bed, glass in hand, his eyes fixed on the windows through which the snow-flakes seemed to peer like tiny pale faces.

He had read with some care the letter from head office and certain sentences flashed across his brandy-inflamed brain like the news headlines in lights he remembered in Piccadilly Circus. He reached for the bottle beside him and poured himself a drink with the stiff movements of an automaton. . . . *After careful consideration . . . we feel that your undoubted talents . . . better employed elsewhere . . . our office in Amsterdam will pay you one month's salary . . . in accordance with our contract. . . .*

Down in the square the bell of a tram clanged out, seeming to vibrate through the snow into his nervous system and clang again like an echo in his head.

Half an hour before, he had had the excruciating pain in his stomach and knew that the ulcer was bleeding. Three months ago they had fed him the barium meal at Guy's Hospital and had X-rayed him. The doctor had issued severe warnings. "An advanced ulcer . . . no alcohol, none at all, and no fried or heavy foods. A light diet, milk, eggs and milk puddings. Small meals, and eat them frequently . . . you understand, Mr Barnes? I can't stress on you too heavily how important it is to comply with my instructions, otherwise . . ." he had shrugged his shoulders and said, ". . . otherwise it will undoubtedly mean an operation."

And Barnes had done the reverse. His consumption of alcohol was greater than ever and he ate the most spicy foods he could find. Living in alcoholic twilight as he did, he no

longer cared. They could take him and cut him open if they wanted to . . . if anyone was interested enough to *want* to take him . . . but he doubted that . . . he wasn't even interested in himself, so how could he expect anybody else . . .

There was a discreet tap on the door, which became more insistent when Barnes didn't answer. Eventually a pass-key scraped in the lock and a porter came in with an air of apology.

Barnes asked wearily, "What is it?"

"The manager, Meinheer, he wonders if . . . perhaps you would be good enough to spare him a minute or two . . . at your convenience, of course . . ."

Barnes nodded absently and the door was discreetly and softly closed. An hour or two earlier, the request would have filled him with terror. Then his nerves were in their morning state of tension when even the sight of a policeman would fill him with fear for no reason at all. Now he was fortified with brandy and was prepared to face anyone . . . even Margaret. . . .

He went to the mirror and examined himself. His eyes were blood-shot and he had cut himself whilst shaving, but apart from that he appeared to look well enough. 'I don't look drunk,' he thought, but then he knew that all drunkards lived under that misapprehension. But drunk or sober, the manager wouldn't wait. It was like an overdraft at the bank, he thought. If you went in from time to time and kept up your bluff, the bank would carry you; but just try and dodge them, they were after your blood without mercy. . . .

'I wonder where one can buy a gun in the Hague,' he asked himself as he went down the stairs, and then laughed softly. What would he do with a gun? Hold up a bank, the cash register in a bar, some wealthy-looking business man out there in the swirling snow? Or just shoot de Groot, and then himself? The image of de Groot flashed before him as he crossed the foyer—the yellow teeth were bared in a grin and the

maggoty eyes were half-closed as they assessed the outcome of his interview with the manager. The picture was so real that Barnes half expected to see the ragged fur collar and the gleam of the spectacles at the porter's desk, but there was nobody there but the porter, who seemed to give him an encouraging smile as he knocked on the manager's door.

"Ah, Mister Barnes . . . please come in and sit down. . . take that comfortable chair there. A cigar? We rather pride ourselves on our cigars in Holland." He opened the box a fraction of an inch, and before Barnes could answer, said "No? You find them a trifle strong?" and closed the box with a snap.

He wore his affability as unconvincingly as a lesbian in a dinner jacket. With his black tail-coat, his long, yellowish face and bony forehead he reminded Barnes of the dusty, evil-smelling birds of prey he had seen in the London Zoo.

Yet he lived in luxury. The office appointments, the large, leather-covered desk, the comfortable arm-chairs, the walnut cabinets with their beautifully bound books—all spoke of money lavishly spent, of a success which Barnes had dreamed about but never achieved.

"I feel sure you will excuse me asking you to come and see me," the manager said, with a smile of the mouth which was meant to reassure Barnes, but which filled him with quick foreboding. "The reason, of course, is your account with us. . . ." Again he smiled, but the expression in those calculating eyes never changed. He fingered a detailed account sheet in his hands, flicking its edges with a nicotine-stained forefinger, "It is customary for guests enjoying a prolonged stay in the hotel to settle weekly." He gave a deprecatory shrug. "The book-keepers, you understand, Meinheer, they complain if they have to deal with a number of overdue accounts. As for the management . . . well, we quite understand that it may be inconvenient for one of our patrons to meet his commitments so frequently . . . after all, you have currency regulations to deal with. . . ."

He broke off and gave Barnes a questioning look. Through the windows came the *clack-clack-clack* of cars passing with chained wheels, and the air was so still in the snow that you could hear the tinkle of bicycle bells as men and women returned to their work after the lunch-break.

The manager gave Barnes a sideways glance. "A glass of cognac, Mister Barnes?"

Barnes was determined to refuse—that the manager was suspicious of his weakness was obvious, but Barnes did not wish to confirm it. But his tongue, equally determined, answered, "Very kind of you. Yes, I'd like one."

As the manager fetched bottle and glasses from one of his walnut cabinets, Barnes fished about in his alcoholic mind for some convincing story. He had done it so often to his bank manager—a new, highly responsible position with increased salary coming up, expectations from an uncle in Southport, a substantial bonus from his firm, an insurance policy of his wife's due. All the old, moth-eaten stories came to his mind, but none of them would fit here.

He searched for cigarettes in his pocket as a diversion, and the letter from head office crackled under his fingers . . . *we feel that your undoubted talents . . . better employed elsewhere . . . in accordance with our contract. . . .*

The glass of cognac in his hand gave him back a little of his confidence. He asked, as casually as he could, "And the amount of my bill?"

The manager spread his fingers wide. "A mere trifle . . . let me see now . . ." he picked up his spectacles and peered at the account sheet, ". . . a mere four hundred *gulden*. Believe me, Mister Barnes, I am not worried . . . but our book-keepers . . ."

Four hundred guilders. The sum struck a chill in Barnes's heart. Just over forty pounds!

He drank back his cognac and said, "Oh, a trifle, as you say."

"And when might our book-keepers expect settlement, Meinheer? At your convenience, of course . . . but if I could give them some little idea?"

"I shall be going to my head office in Amsterdam," Barnes answered, "certainly within the next day or two, and when I return . . . I shall be leaving my things here, of course. I wish to keep my room on."

"Of course," the manager said. "We shall be delighted to reserve it for you, Mister Barnes, delighted. Another glass of cognac? No? I feel sure you will understand that this little meeting was purely to give my book-keepers a date. You know how the mind of an accountant works." He gave a wink, but in that yellow, bony face it resembled more a nervous tic. "No imagination, my dear Mister Barnes, no imagination at all."

He rose to his feet. The interview was over. Like a school-boy before his headmaster, Barnes was being silently dismissed.

"I have enjoyed our little chat so much, Mister Barnes, so very much indeed. We must have another some time."

'God forbid,' Barnes thought. 'Another little chat like this will mean the police, expulsion from the country for debt, perhaps even worse.' He shook hands, shuddering a little as those long, bony fingers fell for a moment into the palm of his hand.

On his way back across the foyer he asked the porter, "Any mail from England?" and again the porter didn't bother to look. "None, Meinheer."

In his room Barnes drew the curtains over the windows and switched on the electric fire. 'I'll test that son of a bitch,' he told himself, and rang the service bell.

He ordered a bottle of brandy, and sat biting his fingernails, wondering what he would do if they had frozen his account. Without brandy all the horrors of the world would come crowding in, all the fears, the remorse, the agony of

utter loneliness. Without brandy he would be unable to move. It was his confidence, his will-power, his anæsthetic against the razor-edge of a life which now was steadily cutting him to pieces.

There came a knock at the door. A porter entered with a bottle of cognac on a tray. He bowed politely and placed it on Barnes's table beside the empty one.

"You can take the dead one away," Barnes said, "and you might bring me half a dozen bottles of soda-water."

He intended to make this bottle last! Forty pounds, four hundred guilders! *We feel that your undoubted talents . . . better employed elsewhere . . .* What talents? Barnes asked himself. A capacity for drink, a smattering knowledge of the diamond trade (he could tell a good stone from an indifferent one, and had an uncanny knack of assessing their value), fluent Dutch and German, and then? Nothing. Such was the sum total of his capabilities, and where had they got him? To an hotel in the Hague, existing on brandy, in debt, and fired from one of the best jobs he had ever had.

As he took the first drink from the new bottle a clock chimed out in the Square. He wondered if Bernhardt and the Queen were in the palace, and what *they* were doing with their lives. Nothing very useful, he imagined, but at least they had the money with which to be useless. Then he was honest with himself, and knew that in spite of their wealth they worked hard, that their public life was as great a strain as any job *he* had ever held down. .

The absurdity of his thoughts was a sure sign that he was beginning to get drunk once more. He knew all the symptoms. Later he would become weary, and for perhaps ten minutes he would see everything clear-cut and definite—his life with Margaret, the wonderful happy and sad year with Jan, the gradual collapse of his life—then the lines of the images would cave in and he would fall into a deep sleep, only to waken with those fears, the unknown dreads, the certainty that

disaster was upon him, terrors from which only that dangerous bottle on the bedside-table would release him.

He knew he would have to go with de Groot to Amsterdam. He was clutching at straws now, and de Groot was about the last straw that would come in his direction. Again the yellow teeth and maggoty eyes rose before him in a vapoury outline. de Groot was grinning with a cunning twist of triumph on his lips. He flicked ash from his cigarette into the turn-ups of his trousers and said, "My employer will be delighted to see you . . . delighted. . . ."

Barnes switched off the light over the bed and slept.

CHAPTER 7

Barnes woke an hour or two before dawn and lay quivering beneath the sheets. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't keep his nerves still. Every now and then his body would give a convulsive jerk, and he felt the sweat gather on his chest and soak the front of his pyjama jacket. All the night sounds of a large hotel pulsed against his ear-drums—the gurgle of water in the pipes, the *pad-pad* of slippers in the corridor and the flush of a toilet, the bang of a door and, from the bowels of the building, the mysterious throbbing of some electric motor or other.

Barnes fumbled for the light over his head, switched it on and lit a cigarette. He coughed away and the breath whistled from his lungs as if he were a man with acute asthma. His breath had the smell of burnt bristles, and he leaned weakly from the bed and drank neat brandy from the bottle.

In the next room he heard a man growl in Dutch, "Why the hell can't he get something for that cough? Waking everybody up. . . ."

Barnes was tempted to shout an insult in return, but contented himself with two or three gulps of cognac. The spirit scalded his throat, but within a few minutes it flamed in his blood, and a kind of peace returned to him. 'Or perhaps it's just a compromise with the devils that sit on my shoulder, 'he thought,' a temporary settlement. . . .

His thoughts turned to de Groot—the flea-bitten fur collar, the shiny suit, the dark overcoat already green with age, the cunning, malicious eyes and the saccharine sweetness of his manner. As he had told himself before, this de Groot was his last hope, but to have to associate with a man like that, to be

dependent upon him! More than ever Barnes realised how cut off he was from the world he had once known, from the life he had been unwise enough to despise.

That disaster was speeding his way he knew. There was no avoiding it now. He had let himself go too far, had come too near the bottom ever to climb back again. He hadn't the strength, either physical or moral, to climb back, even had he wanted to, and this knowledge made him want to weep, to weep for things that were, or that might have been. Yet what was the use of weeping, he told himself, in a way he had asked for what was about to befall him, and there was nothing to be gained from moaning about it.

It was the uncertainty that unnerved him. If he only knew the form the final calamity would take he might be able to prepare for it. But he knew nothing, could guess nothing. Anything might happen, anything at all. All he told himself, was, 'I must get back to England before it happens . . . I must . . . I must. . . .

Curiously enough he still had sufficient pride not to want foreigners to witness his final degradation. If it had to happen, he wanted to be amongst his own people, people who might be charitable enough to sigh and tell each other how different his life might have been. But here, how would *they* know that he *could* have made a success of things? To them he would be nothing more than a drunken Englishman in debt who had met his just deserts.

He was much calmer now. Cognac usually anæsthetised his senses, made his every thought sluggish, but after his long sleep he was wide awake, the spirit burning in his brain, and he found himself in one of those all too brief periods when everything was wonderfully clear. It was as though the past was jerked close, observed through powerful binoculars.

He had had a few moments like that with de Groot in Scheveningen when they had driven past the Kurhaus. Then he had recalled his visit there with Jan back in early 1946 . . .

the week-end, for example, that they had spent lounging on the beach, with the three bottles of champagne, he had brought from the Mess buried in the sand to keep them cool.

And the Round House! How often had he driven up the short gravel path beneath the chestnut trees seeing the white outline of the house glimmering in the night, silvered by a moon which seemed to bound from cloud to cloud, so that at one moment the building was a glowing little palace, and the next, a shadowy monster crouched in the blackness.

Then, too, there were the long winter evenings when he and Jan would sit by the stove and eat the cold duck or chicken, and drink the hock he had given her.

Ah, ah, ah, Barnes thought, those evenings, with snow fluttering outside, the stove roaring within, and Jan, with her dark hair and brown eyes glowing, her body showing beneath the creamy frock as she leaned back on the settee, hands clasped behind her head, watching him, saying nothing, content just to look at his neat hair, the broad forehead and the rather long nose which she loved so dearly. Then both of them were at peace for the moment, for a thousand moments, until the fighting broke out between them once more. For they did fight. Both were stubborn and, to a certain extent, arrogant. But after each fight the loving was such as he had never known, for Jan loved with her blood as well as with heart and body. Yes, he thought, grinding his teeth, with her blood, her blood, her blood. In those moments he had felt as though that blood, red-hot, had flowed into him and scalded him, and with the convulsions of their bodies they both had sensed the mad spinning of the earth, and her hands had moved down the length of him, pulling him tighter and yet tighter to her as if she willed the whole of him to enter her. Then his brain would reel with the forces at work, the terrible, beautiful forces tearing at them. All he would see were those brown eyes, burning, expanding and contracting, and hear her cries of pleasure which drove him into a new frenzy. . . .

But such fighting and loving had its effect upon them. He recalled the night Jan had lain back on the settee, and had said, "We can't go on like this, it's too wearing. I mean it, darling. We simply can't. It wears right through me, makes me exhausted inside, through and through."

He had hunched down in the arm-chair, and the look Jan knew so well had come over his face, a kind of dead look, the death-mask of his usually vital features.

"Why?" he asked. "Why can't we go on like this? We have, and we can again, and you know we can. We can and will."

"No, no, *no*. We must make up our minds, and soon. We put it off and off and wear ourselves out more and more. There must be an end to it, there *must*. . . . For me, anyway. There has to be a decision for *my* sake."

"Your sake, *your* sake," he repeated. "And what about mine? Have you considered that, Jan? What about *my* sake?"

He hunched still further down in the chair, his chin resting on his chest. He stared at her from that lifeless mask, the only touch of life in it being his eyes, black, black as night, with a tiny flame in each as his fury rose.

Jan gave her characteristic shrug of the shoulders, helpless in the face of a decision to be made, and to be made quite alone, for he would never help her. In these moods she couldn't reach him, she seemed to lose contact, even contact of the body, for were she to reach out and touch him the usual spark would not be there—he would be cold to her, heedless of the vibrating message of her body. And if she continued to argue now all she would achieve would be to bang, bang, bang her own nerves in the face of this hard core of opposition.

"I'll make us some coffee," she had said.

"I'll make us some coffee," he had mimicked. "So that's how we reach a decision, is it, by making coffee?"

Yes, he was wearing her nerves thin. She longed to draw

her nails over that death face, furrow the skin for signs of blood, of life-blood in the death-mask. Yet she never would. She loved the face, loved those black, coal-like eyes. She loved too the dark head of hair, rather wiry, springing at the touch. She loved and hated, both emotions writhing within her, exhausting her every nerve so that her whole body felt heavy and helpless. When he was like this, dead and alive, she was so frighteningly-alone. . . .

Some noise outside the hotel dragged Barnes back to the present—to the electric fire in the wall, the flapping curtains, the brandy-bottle at his side, the bills, debts . . . and the dangers. He thought, as he took another drink, that he had known every thought which had passed through Jan's head. They had been as close as that. Why couldn't it have been like that with Margaret? Then things would have been so different. Had it been like that he would be with her now, and with his children, going off to a job in Town each morning, having a game of billiards or bridge at the Club, shopping in the town on Saturday mornings, surprising the kids with a little gift at bed-time on Friday nights.

But it had not been like that, so here he was, alone in the world with nothing but a cognac-bottle and his memories, condemning himself further with each gulp of brandy, yet unable to resist, quite incapable of taking one single step which might help to ward off his inevitable downfall.

CHAPTER 8

When daylight slid through the flapping curtains, Barnes could see that the snow still fell. He lay in bed, the pillows punched into an untidy ball so that he could sit upright. An hour earlier, as the first fingers of light had clutched the horizon, he had had the appalling pains in his stomach, so fierce this time that he had torn the eiderdown in his teeth, and feathers lay about him like flakes of snow from outside. He was drinking brandy still, but well diluted with water. He had run out of cigarettes but had not yet summoned up the necessary courage to ring for more. In any case, it must still be too early for room-service. There had been no sound of breakfasts being prepared. Or had he fallen off to sleep and so missed the noises which gave him some idea of the time? The internal telephone on his bedside clattered shrilly, and Barnes's heart contracted. The manager again? Surely not, since it was only yesterday he had had that strained interview. The bell clattered, cut through Barnes's head like a twisting blade. He lifted the receiver and said gruffly, "Barnes."

"Ah, Meinheer Barnes . . . the hall porter speaking . . ."

"Yes," Barnes answered. "What is it?"

"There is a . . . a person at the desk who claims he has an appointment with you."

"Who is he?"

"A person by the name of de Groot."

The last bridge, Barnes thought, perhaps the last gangway over which he might pass from debt, fear, alcoholism, defeat. Yet in his heart he was sure that no bridge, no gangway, could bear the weight of his despair. "Tell him to go to hell," he said. "What's the time, anyway?"

"Exactly eleven-thirty, Meinheer. I will give the person your message. . . ."

"No, wait a minute . . . a minute. . . ." Barnes kept the receiver to his ear while he thought an idea over. The low hum of mile upon mile of telephone wire filled his tired brain. Glancing at the cognac-bottle in which only a finger or two of spirit remained, it occurred to him that he might strike a bargain with de Groot.

"Are you still there, Meinheer? This person . . ." the voice of the porter shattered the gentle electric hum.

"I'm here still. Would you tell this de Groot to come up?"

"*To come up!*" the porter's voice was filled with shocked surprise. "Are you sure, Mister Barnes, that you wish me to tell this . . . this gentleman to visit you in your room?" Now that Barnes had invited de Groot up he noticed with ironical amusement that he was now *gentleman* to the porter. "Yes," he answered, "send him up, please."

He dropped the receiver back in its cradle, poured the contents of the bottle down his throat and hid the bottle beneath his mattress. Eleven-thirty! Then he must have slept for some hours. Certainly he felt livelier than he had for some days. But he didn't fool himself. He had no false illusions as to why he felt so, or why the hellish pains in his stomach were stilled. The bottle beneath the mattress was the doctor, his guardian, his courage in sending for de Groot.

There was a discreet tap at the door. It opened hesitantly and admitted the scruffy fur collar, the greenish coat and glittering spectacles. de Groot, with his greasy hat in his hand, sidled into the room and bowed gravely at the bed. "An unexpected pleasure, Mister Barnes. I had not thought to be given this invitation. How kind of you, how thoughtful. . . . My employer will be most pleased when I tell him, really quite delighted."

"Sit down, de Groot. It gets on my nerves if people stand

when I'm lying in bed. I'm down with a cold. This damned weather."

de Groot laid his hat on the floor and seated himself. "So! A cold, how very unfortunate. I had expected . . . had hoped . . . that I might have the honour of driving you to Amsterdam today, to my employer. I mentioned to him that you and I had a pleasant little time at Scheveningen and he was most happy to think he would be meeting you today."

"Impossible," Barnes said. "What do you want me to get . . . pneumonia?"

de Groot raised yellowish talons like a monkey's, the dirt showing black through the nails. "God forbid," he said piously, and his maggot's eyes behind their spectacles looked quickly around the room, searching for the tell-tale bottle. He missed nothing—the torn eiderdown, the feathers, the empty water-carafe and the glass, with a fraction of amber fluid at the bottom. "No, Mister Barnes, God forbid that your cold should be made worse. But I had hoped so much . . . and my employer . . ." he broke off, asking himself just what his employer *would* say. He had more or less promised to produce Barnes today, and here he was at a quarter to twelve, lying in his bed, doubtless half-drunk, and certainly unwilling to get up and drive in the snow to Amsterdam. de Groot sighed. Why did life treat *him* so badly? First his nagging wife, and the woman for whom he had stolen stones, then the bastard of an employer throwing the dirty *gulden* over the desk as one might throw a piece of meat to a dog. He had one last try, "If we obtained a thick rug from the hotel," he said, "and wrapped you up warmly, Mister Barnes, you could stay in a good warm hotel in Amsterdam for tonight and tomorrow night, and the next day I would be only too pleased to return you here."

"Nothing doing," Barnes said. "In a day or two, perhaps . . ." He could afford to be independent with de Groot. The fellow's anxiety to get him to Amsterdam was proof enough that they needed him badly. But for what?

"Have you a cigarette?" Barnes asked, and de Groot hurried to give him one, fumbling in his greasy black jacket for a match. "Another thing, de Groot, just why does your employer . . . what's his name . . . ?"

"Mister van Dijk . . ."

". . . van Dijk, just why does he want to see me at all? Or did I ask you that the other day?"

de Groot flicked his ash in his trouser turn-up and gave a shrug of the shoulders. "I am not in his confidence to that extent. A matter of private business of an important nature. To your advantage, of course. Most certainly to your definite advantage. . . ."

"All this talk, talk, talk," Barnes interrupted, "it means nothing, nothing at all. If you were to come here with a sound business proposition, that would be a different matter. Why the hell should I go to Amsterdam, anyway. If this van Dijk of yours is so anxious to see me, why can't he come here?"

Barnes cursed himself under his breath. Hadn't he told himself that this mean little figure represented his last bridge? And here he was, burning it down with truculence and belligerence. But the brandy was wearing off and his nerves were setting up their old jangling. When he had started the cigarette five minutes ago his hand had been quite steady. Now it was beginning to tremble with agitation.

"He is so busy, Mister Barnes. He has indeed expressed a desire to visit you here himself, but business pressure, you understand. . . . He sent me in the car as his . . . his ambassador, if you will forgive the little simile."

Barnes thought, 'I'm burning my bridge, then why not set fire to it properly?' "Listen, de Groot, I have a little proposition for *you*. . . ."

de Groot leaned forward eagerly. Perhaps what was to follow would be a reprieve to save the death of his relations with his employer. "So! A proposition. But certainly, we are both business men, Mister Barnes. . . ."

"Then listen, de Groot. Today is what?"

"Tuesday."

"Right, Tuesday. Very well, if you will go out now, this minute, and bring me back two bottles of cognac I'll be ready and willing to go with you to van Dijk on Thursday morning."

De Groot wrinkled his forehead and his shifty little eyes fixed themselves on Barnes suspiciously. "But how can I be sure . . ." he began.

"I give my word," Barnes said, as though his word was enough to win anybody's confidence, let alone this creature with his scalp-disease collar and poisonous finger-nails. How often before had he given his word, only to break it for the sake of a drink? Countless times, so many he couldn't begin to remember. And for *two* bottles of cognac. . . .

"But my expenses are limited. My employer is not keen on my spending a lot of money, and two bottles of cognac. . . ."

Barnes tried to introduce boredom into his voice, but in reality his heart was beating fiercely enough to burst a blood vessel, and the anxiety to have those two bottles safely locked in his suit-case brought out the sweat on his forehead and upper lip. "Have it your own way," he answered in a stifled voice. "Those are my terms, and you can tell van Dijk *that*."

De Groot rose to his feet and sidled crab-wise to the door. "Would not one bottle be enough, Mister Barnes? For your cold, of course. . . ."

"Two," Barnes said. "I'm stuck here in my bed until Thursday, remember."

De Groot softly opened the door. "I shall be back directly, Meinheer."

As soon as the door closed, Barnes rang for room-service. He ordered yet another bottle of cognac and fifty cigarettes, and said to the waiter, "And give my compliments to the manager. Tell him I shall be going to Amsterdam on Thursday." Going to Amsterdam on Thursday, compliments to the manager, compliments to the bank manager, an expected

legacy, a new and highly paid position, an insurance policy of my wife's now due, going to Amsterdam on Thursday.

It all worked. The waiter returned with the bottle and the cigarettes, and twenty minutes afterwards de Groot sidled in with the pockets beneath his black-green overcoat bulging.

CHAPTER 9

Hendrik van Dijk had been a diamond broker for more than forty years. He probably knew as much about precious stones as any man living, and his passion for what he termed 'intelligent business deals' had made him a wealthy man. Although he considered haggling beneath the dignity of brokers, he loved to indulge in it himself, cloaking it under his famous 'intelligent business deals'. He was a comparatively honest trader. On only one or two occasions in his life had he smuggled a few stones to London, Paris or New York. And then it had only been for the reason that duty would just about have killed his profit. They had to be very special stones for van Dijk to play that sort of game.

Naturally, in his business, he had been offered many chances of making large sums in 'crooked deals', but he fought shy of them. Not only because he feared the law, but also because he liked to think that he was a trusted man in a trade where so many were untrustworthy. Yet he knew pretty well every dishonest transaction that took place in Amsterdam. He was a clever man and he protected himself. By knowing the details of such transactions, he could give them a wide berth, and for that reason he employed such men as de Groot—mean, furtive little men on the shadowy outskirts of the trade.

Hendrik van Dijk looked prosperous. He had long ago given up trying to keep his figure under control, and his sagging chins and distended belly spoke of his love of rich foods—an *uitsmyter* in his office at mid-morning, the highly seasoned *rijsttafel* with its twenty-seven little dishes for lunch, with a pint or two of the rich Heineken beer with which to wash it down—and of a man well able to afford such luxuries.

He spoke in a guttural voice, due to a throat infection in his youth, and that, together with his rather large, square head, had caused many people to believe he was German, or at least of German origin. During the Occupation these attributes had made him suspected by his fellow countrymen who did not know him, and popular with the German forces. But van Dijk had not taken advantage of it. He hated the Germans with a deep hatred. Perhaps because he was indeed of German origin and resented the fact. Nobody knew where his grandparents had come from, not even van Dijk himself.

When de Groot had told Barnes that his employer was too busy to go to the Hague it had been true. Van Dijk rarely left his office—he was always afraid of missing something, an ‘intelligent business deal’, a piece of vital information from the ‘grape-vine’, news of bargain stones to be picked up on one of the big international markets. The only time he ever left Amsterdam was for two days in April to see tulip fields between Haarlem and Leyden, and in September for the opening of Parliament in the Hague. It was his dearest and most secret desire to be presented to the Queen and Prince, but he knew with hopelessness that this was one thing hard work on his part would never achieve.

He sat behind his desk now with his great fleshy hands folded loosely on his blotter. In an arm-chair at his side, smoking one of his best cigars and sipping his Bols, was Davidson of Charles Sivieloos. They had been business associates for many years, yet neither trusted the other. They carried out their transactions like a couple playing chess—move, counter-move, check, check-mate. And frequently a deal took weeks to go through, both men implacable, wanting their own terms.

“Let me see them again,” Davidson said, and van Dijk opened a drawer in his desk, took out a box and poured into his companion’s outstretched hand the three diamonds. They were large stones, flawless. In Davidson’s palm they glowed,

and deep within them there seemed to be a many-coloured fire burning at furnace heat.

"They're beauties," Davidson admitted, "but the duty . . ." he waved his hands as though to dismiss the subject. But he was far from doing that, and van Dijk knew it. Davidson wanted those stones—they could be cut into nine little beauties and sold in Hatton Garden at a nice profit.

"If we settle on the price," van Dijk said, his guttural voice rasping out the English phrases, "if we can but settle the price, it will be my business to deliver them to you in London *at that price*, regardless of duty."

Davidson was immediately suspicious. The price they had discussed three days previously was reasonable to both parties—without taking duty into consideration, that is. If van Dijk were forced to pay import tax it would more than halve his profit. Davidson knew of old that his companion didn't easily sacrifice *that* amount of money.

"Listen, van Dijk, you'd lose two thirds of your profit, and you know it. How do you explain your willingness to do that?"

Van Dijk studied the three inches of blue-grey ash on his cigar. "How, why, where, when, what, which . . . what does it matter so long as the terms we agree upon are kept? How do I explain it, how? I don't explain it, my dear Davidson. I merely give you a promise and keep it. So?"

Davidson asked softly, "Do you propose to smuggle them in, van Dijk?"

"Possibly," van Dijk growled, "but that is my affair, and the less you know about it the better for all concerned. Believe me, my friend, I take no risks, neither for you nor me. Once these stones leave this office they will never be connected with you or me until they reach *you* in London. There will be no witnesses . . . nothing."

Much as he coveted the stones, Davidson did not like the methods which must be employed to get them. He was a natural coward, and the mere thought of being remotely

connected with such an enterprise frightened him. All his life he had feared something—his father, his governess, his headmaster, the war, and finally his wife. That was why she despised him and was bored with him, and he knew it. For that reason Davidson had married again, this time to his business. He worked himself into fits of such utter exhaustion that for a time he could forget the cold, scarcely veiled hostility of his wife, and live in a kind weary half-sleep which even she could not penetrate.

Of course, she tried. Davidson the intelligent and alert coward was preferable to Davidson the weary robot who ignored her and existed on secret thoughts of his own. Yes, he knew that she detested him, but he knew also that she would never leave him. He had too much to offer her—money, social position, a house in the country, trips abroad. The only thing he couldn't give her was his body. Physical contact with her made him impotent. On rare occasions, when she had had too much to drink at a party, she would come to his bed in the night, her body hungry, craving satisfaction. And however passionate Davidson felt as he watched her naked at the dressing-table, combing her long, fair hair (sixty strokes each night to keep the gloss) her small breasts still firm, the nipples pink in the shaded lights, the buttocks round and hard, the moment she came to him, made contact, he was limp and passionless, everything seemed to drain out of him, and his wife would return to her own bed, adding yet another faggot to her fire of hatred and contempt.

Van Dijk's heavy voice pounded over the office, "Well, are we to do business? I accept the figure we discussed earlier, the deposit to be paid to me on Friday morning at ten-thirty."

Davidson's mind hauled itself back painfully to the present. He was no longer in bed with his wife, he was in Amsterdam, doing his business, a trade in which he was far from impotent.

"But what about the courier?" he mumbled, his mind wasn't

quite back yet, not absolutely aware that it was with his second wife.

"The courier is safe," van Dijk said, "I personally am taking care of him. de Groot is in fact bringing him from the Hague at this moment. He should be here within the hour."

"I'd like to meet him," Davidson said. "After all, my company has as much at stake as you."

"Better not."

"Why? Why the secrecy?" Davidson was once more alert, happily married, looking after the interests of a wife who made no sexual demands upon him, required merely the razor-edged mental processes.

"There is no great secret. This is a straightforward enterprise, an intelligent business deal. Believe me, Davidson, I am not in the habit of taking these little risks . . . in fact, I dislike them, as you do . . . but in life, occasionally . . ." he opened his hands on the blotter, closed them again, ". . . when business requires a trifling risk, why, we must have the courage to take it."

"But this courier. . . . Are you sure you can trust him? If he's caught he can involve us."

Van Dijk smiled. Lines between eyes and nose in the flabby flesh darkened. "Since you must know, I propose to use your late employee Mister Barnes."

Davidson jerked up in his chair, "You *what!*"

"Why not? He is an honest man. A foolish one, perhaps, but honest."

Davidson banged his right hand into the palm of his left. "Do you know why we dismissed him?"

"Drink, I imagine."

"Exactly, drink. Unreliability, irresponsibility, the worst possible defects one can have in business. And you want to use him as a courier. You must be mad, van Dijk."

"Have another gin, my dear friend, and consider the advantages of my choice. Mister Barnes must by now be in

debt. All heavy drinkers land in debt sooner or later."

"There's a month's salary waiting for him in our office here, and he knows it," Davidson interrupted.

"So what does that matter? He will need more money, and I will give it to him, provided he will go to England, carrying these stones in a place I have thought of . . . to be candid, in an, opened bottle of cognac. He will undoubtedly be half-drunk and the customs have a habit of passing such people, believing them to be tourists on a spree. And did you know something, my friend? A customs officer can read nervousness or fear on a person as easily as you and I can read an invoice. But they won't read anything on our friend Barnes' face. Brandy will see to that."

"And what about on the other side, when he's back in England?" Davidson asked. "He's only got to be offered a drink or two and he'll be off for days on the spree. He might lose the stones, drop the bottle. . . ."

"Might this, might that, might the other," van Dijk had a passion for repetitive sarcasm of this sort, "might have his head shot off, might slip on a banana skin, a cabbage, orange peel . . . yes, yes, yes, I have considered that. But he will be met on the other side by one of my London office staff, followed on the train to London, and there Meinheer Barnes will be handed his money, and be relieved of the responsibility of possession of the stones."

"And suppose he's caught?"

"That, as you English gentlemen say, is his bad luck. Nobody will believe any story of his when they learn he was dismissed from his post in Amsterdam." Van Dijk gave a complacent smile. "After all, my good friend Charles Sivieloos has a reputation for honest trading and, if I may be permitted to say so, so have I."

"We certainly have," Davidson answered unpleasantly. "This is the first time . . . I repeat . . . *the first time* my company has ever entertained the idea of buying smuggled stones."

"But, my dear sir, you know where they come from—the collection of the Count de B. Perfectly legitimate. All that is not quite regular is the avoidance of import duty. And after all, even the most timid of tourists does his lying to the customs."

Davidson drank his Bols and said acidly, "It isn't part of the contract that my company takes any responsibility for the manner in which you transmit the stones to London. We have offered you a price, and as long as they are delivered on the specified date, that's the end of it so far as we are concerned."

"Just so, just so." Van Dijk belched politely behind his podgy fist. A clerk entered and coughed discreetly.

"Well, well, what is it?"

"Meinheer de Groot is outside and wishes to see you."

"Good, very good, and has he a gentleman with him?"

"No, Meinheer, he is quite alone."

The smile vanished from van Dijk's face. "Alone, you say? Alone. Tell him to come in."

de Groot came into the room in his crab-like, apologetic fashion.

"Well," van Dijk said harshly, "where is he?" His good-humour, his bonhomie was reserved for clients and friends; he had none to waste on servants of this level.

de Groot forced his rigid, resentful features into a timid smile. "He is in bed with influenza, Meinheer. It was impossible to bring him in that condition, although I tried. But he has given me his word he will come on Thursday. He is most anxious to meet you. In fact, he told me he had heard a lot about you, and would be delighted to . . . to . . . have a meeting."

"Thursday," van Dijk snarled. "Thursday, *Thursday*. I told you he must be here today, Tuesday. You bungler, imbecile, *trottel*! Get out and stay in the outer office. I'll speak to you later."

When the door closed van Dijk forced an amiable smile, but

it didn't fool Davidson. All he said was, "What did I tell you, van Dijk? Unreliable, unpredictable. All these alcoholics are the same."

"Have patience, my dear friend; if I have to go to the Hague myself, he will be here on Thursday; and *sail* on Thursday, I promise you."

Davidson rose and took his hat from the rack. "That's your affair, so long as you keep to delivery date." It was rarely that Davidson swore, but he finished, "Influenza be buggered. Brandyenza's more like it."

Barnes had summoned enough energy to have a bath, dress and go down to the restaurant for a light lunch. He felt secure in the knowledge that three bottles of brandy lay safely locked in his suit-case. Without a supply there he felt naked and defenceless, like a gunman cornered without his pistol. He congratulated himself on the fact that not only had he squeezed two of the bottles out of de Groot, but had got rid of the man into the bargain.

After lunch he went in the hotel bar, perched himself on a high stool and ordered a large liqueur brandy. Beside him sat two well-fed Dutch merchants discussing the prices of Delft china. Barnes found himself envying their solidity, the fact that they were so obviously at peace with themselves and with the whole world. No debts, Barnes thought, no serious problems, no terrors in the night, just a straightforward life, business during the day, at home with their families in the evenings, perhaps a game of billiards and a drink or two of Bols with their cronies on Saturday nights. Well, so far as *he* was concerned, that was behind him, lost forever. He recalled, for no reason at all, a saying he had once heard—*Every man has his destiny, and if his road leads into the wilderness he must walk it with shoulders straight, head held high and a smile upon his face.*

Barnes ground his teeth. What about his tearing the eiderdown with his teeth in those dark hours, his fits of exhausted weeping when fear and alcohol became too much for him? *With head held high, shoulders straight and a smile upon his face.* The bastard that wrote that had probably lived in security and comfort, didn't know the meaning of an empty belly, of loneliness bordering on insanity, of utter despair.

He ordered another drink and told the barman to put it on his bill. „His bill, his bill! That must be mounting up alarmingly. He had ordered quite a bit to drink since he had seen the manager, and as he sat there, half listening to the interminable chatter on china from Delft, he wondered if the Dutch authorities could imprison you for not paying your bills. False pretences, some charge of that sort. Barnes shuddered at the thought. He had visited a Dutch prison and the picture of it flashed into his mind now.

It had been in 1946 when, as a captain in the Intelligence Corps, he had been posted to the British Military Mission to the Netherlands. Under him he had had a number of Dutch counter-espionage officers, and his duties had been chiefly concerned with screening Dutch military personnel who were recommended by the Netherlands Government for training in England on secret equipment. It was Barnes's responsibility to see that none of these men had collaborated with the Germans during the Occupation. The job was simple enough, particularly with the help of his three Dutch colleagues. In fact, at times Barnes found himself bored stiff with the whole business.

It was on one of the quiet days that Lieutenant van Der Meer had come into his office, saluted smartly, and told him, "They have Lindemanns in gaol in the prison at Scheveningen, and he's asking permission to see a British Security Officer. I thought you might care to go, Captain."

"Lindemanns?" Barnes repeated. The name was vaguely familiar.

"Yes, Lindemanns, sir. 'King Kong', he used to be called in the Dutch Underground. He was one of the best Underground leaders of the lot, until he seemed to go mad and gave the Arnhem droppings away to the Germans before they took place."

Barnes remembered. King Kong. One of the major traitors of the Dutch Resistance movement. He decided to go.

They reached the prison at Scheveningen towards evening

on an overcast October day. Massive, iron-studded gates were swung open for their car and they drove into the prison courtyard. The very sight of those damp-looking, massive brick buildings sent a chill through Barnes, and inside it was even more depressing. Long concrete corridors ran parallel with the building's outer walls, and to right and left were steel doors, each with its judas-hole through which the patrolling guards peered as they did their tour of duty. The whole place stank of steel and urine and excrement, and that, together with the sight of those steel doors and their tiny spy-holes, was enough to make Barnes sorry for the prisoners inside, even though he knew some of them to be war criminals and major collaborators of the worst order.

"All hope abandon," Barnes muttered to himself, and Lieutenant van Der Meer asked respectfully, "I beg your pardon, Captain?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," Barnes answered. He would be glad to get out of the place, into the fresh air. This stench of iron brought to mind the vision of fetters and manacles, of emaciated human beasts chained to walls. And there was another smell, too, one which Barnes could not define: an odour of despair nearing its limit. He smelt it just as a dog smells fear. He wanted now to be back in the Mess, with its laughter and bright lights, and he needed also the comfort of Jan's arms, an assurance that he was once more in a world of normality.

It was getting dark outside, and they had switched on the prison lights—mean little bulbs high in the ceiling behind a shell of steel mesh. The prison officer asked him, "Would you like to see something interesting, Captain Barnes?"

'Now that I'm here,' Barnes thought, 'I might as well see it all.' He nodded. They approached a steel door on their right and the prison officer put his eye to the judas-hole. After a moment or two he beckoned Barnes to have a look. Through the aperture he had a good view of the small cell, with the

minute ceiling bulb lighting the white-washed walls, the bunk and the solitary chair—nothing else but the ghastly figure which lay beneath the blankets with just its head visible. The man lay rigidly on his back, his open eyes gazing at the light. Around his throat was a leather collar, and attached to this was a long adjustable screw with a leather cup clamped to the man's chin. On the top of his head a similar screw glittered in the lamp-light.

The face was white, like a man recently dead. 'He is dead, in a way,' Barnes told himself, 'the living dead.' He shivered. There seemed something so evil in that leather collar, the long adjustable screws.

"Who is he?" Barnes asked.

The prison officer smacked his lips as though in anticipation of some tasty snack. "Our prize prisoner," he said, "the one and only Seyss-Inquart."

Barnes was shocked. Realisation that one of the greatest Nazi butchers was only a few feet from him unnerved him a little. Seyss-Inquart, Nazi Reich Commissioner for Holland, the man who had calmly ordered the execution of over 4,000 Dutch citizens as a reprisal for the Dutch patriots' attempt on the life of the Nazi Rauter. Seyss-Inquart who had purged Holland of its Jews, deporting more than 115,000 to the concentration camps of Buchenwald and Mauthausen and allowing their relatives to buy their ashes from the crematorium ovens at seventy-five guilders a time. Seyss-Inquart who, in a speech in Amsterdam in 1941, had announced publicly, "*The Jews for us are not Dutch. . . . They are those enemies with whom we can come to neither an armistice nor a peace. We will beat the Jews wherever we meet them and those who join them must bear the consequences. The Fuhrer has declared that the Jews have played their final act in Europe and they have, therefore, played their final act.*"

Barnes had remembered nearly every word of that little speech. Before coming to Holland he had studied records of Nazi atrocities, and knew pretty well every murderous

move Seyss-Inquart had made in the years of Occupation.

The prison officer, pleased with the impression he had made, remarked, "Well, he can't do much killing now, can he?"

"Where did you get him from?" Barnes asked. They might have been discussing some strange animal, captured in God knows what country. "From one of the War Crimes Tribunals," the officer said, "and he's precious meat, believe me. We wouldn't part with him for anything." He spoke as though he might almost have felt some affection for the man lying so still on his bunk, the strange affection a mother might have for a son convicted of murder and rape.

Barnes looked through the judas-hole again. Seyss-Inquart never moved his head—he couldn't, of course, Barnes thought. That contraption with its cups and screw held his head as rigidly as though clamped in a vice. He might have been sleeping but for those open, unblinking eyes, staring at the bulb behind its steel shell. What must he be thinking? What hellish ideas must be flashing through that brutal, perverted mind? Dreams of power lost? Recollections of the time when a wave of his hand to his adjutant, his signature to a scrap of paper could send a detachment of SS to any village in Holland, there to rape the women, shoot them, with their men, in a mass grave? For he had done that, and more. Or was he conscience-stricken, seeing between his eyes and that glowing little bulb the ghosts of thousands of bullet-ridden corpses floating through his cell in accusation? Or perhaps of Hitler and Eva Braun, Goebbels and his wife and six children, General Krebe and General Burgdorf, all committing suicide in the Berlin Bunker as Russian bombs and artillery shells roared and thundered against the Bunker's massive concrete roof, as the Russian armies advanced through Hitler's capital, a mass of flames, writhing in its final death throes?

Barnes noted with some surprise that Seyss-Inquart's face was smooth and well-shaved. Strange, that on looking at one of the world's great mass murderers he should have such an

irrelevant thought. He asked the officer, "You give him a barber?"

The officer grinned. "Why not? He can't cut his throat with that pretty little collar on."

Barnes turned away from the judas-hole. Once more he was faced with the rows of iron doors, the patrolling sentries, the dim lights on concrete, the stench of captivity—steel, concrete, urine, misery.

At last he asked, "That collar and those screws . . . what the hell are they for?"

"He broke his neck in an accident," the officer explained. "That little necklace keeps his head perfectly still so that the bones can knit."

"He'll get well?"

"Certainly. In a month or two he'll be as fit as you and I. The doctors take a lot of trouble over getting him well."

"I always thought a broken neck was fatal," Barnes said, "but one's constantly surprised at what medicine can do."

"Some breaks are fatal," the officer said. He jerked his head at the iron door. "He was lucky. As I mentioned before, he'll be up and about, quite whole and hearty in a month or two."

"What then?" Barnes asked.

"Then we hang the bastard," the officer said, and courteously beckoned Barnes to go in front of him down the damp corridor.

CHAPTER II

The two Dutch merchants had sent a waiter out into the street to purchase them a plate of raw herring. Each of them in turn threw his head back and lowered strips of the fish into his mouth with the precision of a sword-swallower. Both were now a little drunk. Their conversation had switched from Delft china to women. One had recently been on a business trip to Brussels and was recounting vividly his experiences with a *petite* prostitute he had picked up on the Adolf Max. His companion called him an old liar and a heated argument began, but it soon ended in the ordering of large gins.

Barnes felt better than he had for some days. Having managed to get his lunch down probably had a good deal to do with it. He found that he did not envy these Dutch merchants quite so much now, but this changed frame of mind was a danger signal. It meant that once more brandy was injecting him with its fool's courage. Still, better to feel like this than lie in bed with that tearing pain in the stomach and all the devils of the night perched on his chest leering at him.

He ordered another liqueur brandy, and in the mirror over the bar spotted the manager passing the bar door. Their eyes met in the mirror, but the manager went on. 'He's probably had my message and truly believes that I shall then be able to pay my account in full and settle down for another long stay.'

He sipped his drink and wondered idly if those prosperous Dutch gentlemen at his side had been collaborators in the war. Not that it was his business any more, but it gave his mind a chance of thinking about something other than himself. 'The picture of the Scheveningen gaol was with him still, and he

tried to recall in every detail the meeting he had had with the infamous Lindemanns, traitor of Arnhem.

When they had left Seyss-Inquart's cell the prison officer had taken them to a small room at the end of the corridor, and there had left them.

A prison guard unlocked the steel door and Barnes and Lieutenant van Der Meer entered, and paused for a moment to examine Lindemanns lying on top of his blankets, with his knees drawn up to his stomach. He was a massive man, with dark hair and a shadowed chin which would need to be shaved twice a day. Barnes judged him to be well over six feet two inches in height, and the great shoulders and hair-covered fore-arms gave some indication of his strength.

The warder brought in a second chair, left the cell and clanged the door closed. A key grated in the lock—Barnes was locked in with King Kong, one time head of the Dutch underground movement, a terror to the Germans, until he went over to them with his secret information and so made a bloody fiasco out of what might have been a great British military operation.

He smiled up at Barnes and held out a huge paw. Barnes ignored it and sat down. He said to Lieutenant van Der Meer, "Does he speak English?"

The lieutenant spoke to Lindemanns. He answered haltingly. "A little, Captain."

"Well," Barnes said coldly, "I understand you wanted to see a British Intelligence Officer. Here I am."

Before he could answer, the key ground in the lock and a nurse came in. She apologised in Dutch, and from a kidney-shaped tray she carried took a hypodermic needle and inserted it into Lindemann's arm. Barnes watched her carefully. She was a young girl, not more than twenty-three or four, with an ungainly figure, heavy, as many Dutch women tend to be. She touched Lindemann's arm with great gentleness, and he in turn smiled a secret little smile as she rolled down his sleeve again.

Barnes said to Lieutenant van Der Meer, quickly, in English, "What are the injections for?"

"He has paralysis. Probably some drug, or vitamins, perhaps."

"How long has he been like this?"

"Some time now. He was taken to England for interrogation after the war, as you know, and when he came back, he developed this paralysis. Apparently he can't even sit up in bed without help."

"And the nurse?"

"Oh, just one of the hospital staff, I imagine."

"She seems pretty fond of him."

"With her face and figure, she'd probably be fond of anything in trousers that pinched her bottom from time to time."

It seemed grotesque to think of a love affair taking place between this paralysed and broken giant and the awkward, obese girl attending him. And in a prison, of all places. Barnes found the thought interesting and revolting. As though conscious that she was in his thoughts, the nurse turned, nodded her head and said in Dutch, "I am sorry to interrupt you, but it is important that he has his injections at regular intervals."

Barnes nodded and the nurse banged on the iron, was let out, and the iron banged shut again.

Barnes said to Lindemanns, "We'll speak Dutch. I haven't a lot of time, so if you've anything to say, you'd better say it quickly."

Lindemanns wore a heavy dark moustache. He pulled it between finger and thumb and asked abruptly, "If I have valuable information to give, is there a chance that your government will request mine to give me a reprieve?"

"He's under sentence of death, as you know, sir," Lieutenant van Der Meer broke in.

"I have no authority to answer a question of that sort," Barnes said. "If you have any information you think of value

you'd better pass it on to me and it will be up to my superiors to make any decisions regarding you."

"But is there a chance?" Lindemanns persisted; "say one chance in a hundred . . . a thousand . . .?"

"I've already told you, nothing I can say or do will make the slightest difference to any decisions my superiors may come to. I will merely submit my report and that will be the end of it so far as I am concerned. And don't expect me to be too patient, Lindemanns. I lost a lot of good friends at Arnhem."

"I'm sorry, Captain, truly sorry. It was a terrible business, so many lives lost . . . such . . . such . . . waste . . ."

Barnes found it difficult to believe his ears. There could be no doubt about it—the traitor, lying there on his bunk curled up with paralysis, was perfectly sincere.

"You mean to tell me, Lindemanns, that you're *truly sorry*, when you, on your own admission, alerted the Germans two or three days before the droppings took place?"

Lindemanns clenched a fist and banged it on his thigh. "I had no option."

"*You had no option!*"

"It's true, Captain. Put yourself in my place. The Germans had my wife, a woman I really loved, loved more than myself. Could *you* let a woman who meant that much to you be tortured by the Gestapo and then put to death? That was what they threatened, and that is what they would have done."

"Threats, threats. Are threats enough to make a man sacrifice his own country, and an ally into the bargain? That story won't wash with me, Lindemanns, any more than it did with the tribunals you've faced. Threats . . . what are threats, anyway?"

"From the Gestapo they mean just what the threat contains. Captain," Lindemanns said, and raised a hand as though to shield off a blow, "Captain, in 1944 two of my underground workers were captured by an SS unit of the Germans. They were both lads under twenty-five, and neither had hurt a hair

of a German's head. Yet we found them in a wood with their ears and tongue cut off, they had been castrated and one of them was nailed to a tree with a bayonet. Neither had bullet wounds, so the way they died is too horrible to consider. The Germans had left a notice saying, 'This is what happens to enemies of the Reich'. I saw that, Captain . . . two of my own lads that I was training.' Do you think that after a sight like that one could doubt the Gestapo when they made their threats?"

Barnes said harshly, "Lindemanns, at a conservative estimate, the Germans in Poland, Russia, Norway, Belgium and here in Holland, murdered either by shooting or the gas chambers some four million families. Do you imagine any of *them* wanted to die? Or to see their families die before their eyes? But that happened, Lindemanns, and there aren't many records of the men betraying their country, even when their own children were shot down before their eyes."

It was true. How often and agonisingly had SS divisions swept into towns and villages, parked their vehicles in the square, or formed road blocks in the streets, then started their terrible massacres, their burnings and lootings.

Lindemanns said, "I had nothing in my mind but the thought of my wife . . . nothing, you understand . . . nothing. . . ."

"We'll leave the *reasons* for all this," Barnes answered, "and come back to the question of what you wanted to see me about."

"You will pass it on to your government?"

"How many more times must I tell you? A full report will be made."

"And you will put in a good word or two for me?"

"My report will be in accordance with military requirements."

"Military requirements," Lindemanns said sadly. "I have seen these so-called military requirements. Cold, eh? Impersonal . . . just fact, fact, fact. . . ."

Although Barnes wore his greatcoat the damp chill of the cell touched his flesh. He wondered that Lindemanns could lie there on top of the blanket in his shirt-sleeves. He supposed that with paralysis you did not feel the cold, felt nothing, in fact. From out in the passage came the sound of tin mugs clanging, the drawing of bolts, harsh orders.

"Soup time," Lieutenant van Der Meer explained. "Will they give you yours, later, Lindemanns?"

"The nurse will bring mine," Lindemanns answered, with a twist to his lips that was almost a smirk. And to think that paralysis kept him from the gallows! How many people outside were terrified at the word paralysis, yet to this man the disease was a reprieve. Doubtless he prayed to some God, if he believed in any, that they would never be able to cure him. Once cured, it was the short walk in the middle of the night, the dangling noose, the clatter of the dropping traps, the end.

Lieutenant van Der Meer spoke sharply, "The Captain has taken the trouble to come out and see you, Lindemanns. Say what you have to say. The Captain isn't going to waste a lot of time on *you*."

Lindemanns looked up at the two officers. Curious what small eyes he had in relation to the size of his head. Rat's eyes, cunning, searching for the slightest sign of hope, of escape from the awful fate that awaited him. But he found none in the two men before him. The lieutenant's face was expressionless; Barnes found it difficult to conceal the hatred he felt for this man.

"It concerns certain friends of mine outside," Lindemanns explained, "old comrades in the Resistance movement who still believe in me. . . ."

"Don't waste my time with lies," Barnes snarled. "Nobody believes in you, Lindemanns . . . not your mother . . . not your wife. . . ."

His words were like a slap in the face to the man doubled up on his bunk. "My wife . . . you've seen her . . . she doesn't

believe in my . . . doesn't believe in *me*. . . . Now it's you who's lying, Captain. Look what I've sacrificed for her . . . my reputation, my life. . . ."

"You're not dead yet."

"Only because I have this complaint. But when they cure it," he drew a finger across his throat, "the end, finish, *kaput*."

"Your end, whatever it may be, isn't of the slightest interest to me."

"No, but my wife, Captain," Lindmanns appealed to him, "surely to Christ *she* won't desert me?" But the idea that she might was now fertilising in his dark brain. Again his bunched fist banged down on his thigh. "The cow . . . the dirty whore . . . and what have *I* done for *her*? Everything a man could do . . . more. . . ." he paused, then said more quietly, "You're having me on, Captain, I don't believe she could. I don't believe it."

"Never mind about your wife. She's of no interest to me either. Come to the point, Lindemanns."

The clock in the prison tower clanged out the hour of five. Each chime vibrated in the prison walls, in the floors, in the blood of each convict. One hour nearer release, or death.

"I was telling you, Captain, I still have contact outside with men who were with me in the Resistance. They have learned of Russian arms and ammunition dumps hidden across Holland and Belgium and in France. For the Communist elements in each country. Arms enough to have a Red uprising any time they wish."

Barnes asked harshly, "How could information of this sort reach *you*?"

Lindemanns lowered his voice. "Sometimes, at night, I manage to get out of the prison for an hour or two. There are guards here who knew me in the old days; they co-operate provided I give my parole."

Barnes rose to his feet. "Come on, van Der Meer." He

turned to Lindemanns. "Consider yourself lucky you *have* got paralysis, or I personally would request to have you punished for wasting the time of British Security with this pack of lies."

Lindemanns raised a hand imploringly, "Captain . . ." Barnes paused in the act of rapping on the door. Lindemanns was searching him with eyes that burned with the fires of death. "I swear to you what I say is the truth. As for paralysis, I'm no more paralysed than you."

Both Barnes and Lieutenant van Der Meek took a pace back as Lindemanns hauled his great bulk from the bunk and stamped heavily on the floor. It was true, he was as fit as either of them.

"For God's sake," Lieutenant van Der Meer said, "it's in his official medical records that he suffers from paralysis. How the hell has he fooled them all this time?"

"We learned things in the underground," Lindemanns said, "and I *have* fooled them. When your life depends on a thing you can put on a good act. I have to act, act and go on acting." Again he drew his finger over his throat. "Otherwise, as I said, *kaput*."

The two officers seated themselves again. Lieutenant van Der Meer took notes as Barnes questioned the traitor. The clock beat out six tremulous strokes before they were finished. At the end of it, as the guard opened the door, Barnes said, "It will be up to my people to decide what they must do, Lindemanns. Good-bye."

Lindemanns was once more lying on the bunk, his knees drawn up to his belly, as though in pain. The guard gave a brief look in the direction of the bed before slamming the cell door closed and locking it.

Months later, when Barnes was on fourteen days leave in England, he read in the *Telegraph* that Lindemanns, known in the Dutch Resistance as King Kong, had committed suicide in the prison of Scheveningen by taking poison smuggled into his cell by one of the nurses employed in the prison.

CHAPTER 12

Snow as fine as icing-sugar lay along the walls of the Palace and between the plane trees in the centre of the Square. The bitter air snapped at one's face and cut without mercy through the thickest clothes. Many of the cars had chains on their wheels which slithered uselessly on the iced road.

The sky was clear and the stars seemed nearer, glittering icily in the grey-black heavens. It was a brutal winter. Pedestrians shuffled along the rimed pavements with their hands deep in their coat-pockets, their heads hunched down and their breath pluming in front of them like steam. Many of them stopped before each shop window, attracted by the lights which gave an impression of warmth.

Barnes was amongst them. He had already walked twice round the Square and was now about to walk it again. The cold air had cleared his brain a little; it had also bitten his ears and nose so that they felt as though they had been burned. The moon gleamed on the snow and on the rimed pavements and in its eerie light the frosted outline of the Palace looked like something out of a fairy tale. Incredible to think that in only a few months it would still be daylight, and warm, with the women parading round in their light frocks, frocks which the breeze blew between their legs as they walked, showing the outlines of their body almost as clearly as if they were naked. The two cafés would have their tables and chairs out on the pavement and you could sit there drinking iced drinks and make coarse comments on the women as they went by.

How often had he done it with brother officers back in 1946? Seated out there before dinner they would have an apéritif or two, discuss the day's events, then inevitably hazard

guesses as to the sexual potentiality of each pretty girl as she passed. It had been so harmless and innocent—young officers enjoying their first *real* relaxation after five years of fighting; no thought of having to return to the lines, of barrages and mortars, tanks, bayonets and bombing, of suffering and mutilation and death on the grand scale.

Barnes had certainly enjoyed it. The eighteen months in the Hague had been a holiday for him—a long vacation before returning to civilian life, to a steady job, to Margaret and the children. He had even looked forward to it. The Army didn't seem quite the same when the war was over. The old sense of comradeship had crumbled and had finally been engulfed in peace-time discipline and red tape.

As he walked round the Square, with his heels ringing on the iron-hard pavement, Barnes wondered for the thousandth time whether he had made a mistake in leaving the Army. Had he remained in, surely all *this* would not have happened to him—the slow slide down-hill, separating from Margaret, relying more and more on drink, losing one job after another, losing the quiet dignity which had always been one of his characteristics, his self-respect? Or perhaps it was inevitable. *'Each man has his destiny, and if the road leads into the wilderness. . . .'* Yes, perhaps even the Army would never have held him, and that would have meant, at best, resignation, and at worst detention and court-martial.

In a small cul-de-sac off the Square Barnes noticed a beggar crouched against the wall, his knees drawn up to his chin. He had sheets of dirty brown paper wrapped round his legs for warmth, fastened by pieces of wire.

Barnes stooped and handed the old man one of the few remaining guilders left in his possession. "Have a hot drink, old friend."

The beggar mumbled something. His face was fearfully pock-marked and a black growth like a fungus mushroomed out on his nose. He stuffed the note in some remote pocket

and continued to stare dejectedly at the frozen pavement between his open knees.

'He must walk with shoulders straight, head held high and a smile upon his face.' A smile upon his face! Barnes had a sudden urge to scream with laughter. Over on the far side of the Square you could press your face to the steaming windows of the café and see any number of jewelled, sleek, dissatisfied Jews, bored with their money, the rich and unchanging pattern of their lives. And here, in this cul-de-sac. . . .

'Destiny,' he thought, 'destiny is just a dirty joke, mocked by the rich and cursed by the poor.' But you had to laugh, just the same, even if it was unhealthy laughter. Who, after all, could keep a straight face glancing through the vapoury glass at the diamond-sparkling women, sleek as cats, ready to tear at each other's throats as a diversion, and then at this beggar with his brown-paper puttees, his pock-marks and the fungus blocking his nostrils?

"Cheer up," Barnes muttered in English to the old man, "I may be with you one of these nights, grandpa, so keep a soft place for me."

He continued on his way round the Square, paused for a few moments outside the café which, in 1946, had been the Officers' Club, and debated whether or not to go in. Finally he decided against it. Apart from other factors, there was always the question of money. He had little left now; by Thursday, he anticipated he would have none at all. In any case, the café would hardly be the same. Twelve years had elapsed, and a lot can happen in twelve years. The Dutch had different ideas about running things, and he wanted to remember it as it had been—the lower floor filled with tables covered with spotless cloths, smart waiters, the pleasant little orchestra on the dais in the far corner, the dance-floor and, upstairs, a dining-room discreetly lighted where exquisite meals were served at reasonable prices. And, above all, many of his friends about him. He had had many friends in those

days—he had been popular, in a curious way. Few had taken advantage of the quiet which seemed to surround him, of the curious dignity with which he was unconsciously possessed, yet all had wanted to be with him, just as he had wanted them to be with him. He had liked company in those days. Often, after he had gone to bed, one or two fellow officers would drift in, sit chatting and having a last drink, somehow loath to go. When they had gone he would switch off the light and lie in the darkness with his hands pillowed beneath his head, contented for the first time in his life. He had not had much time for contentment in the war. Then there had been too much to do, too many lives dependent on him for peace or contentment.

And before the war? Before the war there had been his mother suffering with her creeping paralysis, so that one year she could only walk with the aid of metal springs on her legs, the next she could not walk at all, and after that it was impossible for her to leave her bed. Death played a macabre game with her, teasing her, prodding her body here and there as though to say, *'You won't feel that part of you any more, and that is one step nearer the heart. When I get to the heart. . . .*

Barnes had loved his mother dearly. The long years of her serious illness had undermined his mental tranquillity; it was as though he were constantly poised on the very edge of life, waiting for some catastrophe to throw him over. After she had died, in a fit of brutal anger and loneliness, he had married Margaret. He did it as a kind of defiance of fate, swearing that he would *never* be lonely, cut adrift with his own dark thoughts. He would have someone to share his life, to wipe away the memory of those years with understanding and gentleness.

But she had never been able to do that. She came from a hard-faced, predatory family who had made money out of steel and considered themselves high in the social scale. They had disapproved of their daughter's marriage to Barnes, whose father was, after all, merely a country veterinary surgeon. A

'pig-sticker', as her mother would say in one of her more vicious mood.

Margaret had loved him, had been proud of him when he had been commissioned in the Army. She had dragged him along to tea-party after dreary tea-party, to cocktail parties and the ballet. He met her friends—commonplace, artificial little bitches who thought of men in terms of pounds, shillings and pence and social position. They didn't care who they got their painted talons into so long as he possessed both these requirements.

All Barnes possessed was a commission in the Army, the future prospect of death or mutilation or captivity, and the memory of a mother unable to walk and a father who afterwards died of hopelessness and drink.

He had tried to help his father by spending odd week-ends in the little cottage in which he lived in the South. Margaret would never accompany him. So far as she was concerned, his father never existed. He would find the older man either in the local public-house or seated in the living-room with a bottle by his side.

The cottage was on the outskirts of the village, surrounded on three sides by the fields and meadows which swept in squares and oblongs up to the ridge of trees which crested the hills. Cattle and sheep grazed contentedly at the rich grass, and a serene stillness hung over the land. It seemed incredible to Barnes that in the midst of this serenity a man's mind might be dying. But his father's mind was. Month by month you could see it. The eyes at times would be vacant, then perplexed, as Barnes recalled some exciting incident in their lives, finally unbelieving, as though he had no faith that such good times had ever existed.

Sometimes Barnes would point at the fields through the living-room windows. "Isn't all that worth living for, father? Look at those animals out there . . . they're *your* responsibility, the farmers rely on you."

"Your mother relied on me once, and look what a lot of good that did her."

"You can't blame yourself, Father. It was incurable, and you know it. God knows how many doctors have told you that over the past ten years."

His father was in his fifties, yet he looked a man of seventy. The flesh on his face had puckered itself into black, forbidding lines, and his hair was pure white. At times he would jerk his hand at the bottle and mutter, "*That . . .* that's incurable too, mark my words."

"Nonsense," Barnes would answer. "Just suppose that the doctors had told mother that all she must do to get well was to leave alcohol alone. Don't you think she would have done it? She'd have jumped at the chance and thanked God on her knees for having made it so easy. Then you can. You must. It's killing you, Father, I can see it is."

"With the death of your mother, I was pretty well condemned too," his father said, and said it without self-pity. He was stating a fact. Barnes knew it to be true. They had been devoted to one another, and her illness had brought them still closer together, made them more tender, more thoughtful, the one because she thought her sickness prevented her partner from enjoying his life to the full, the other because he believed that any good times he might have would only serve to bring home to her the awareness that she would never have them.

And so they had lived, simply, quite happily, until things had got so bad that they came to take Barnes' mother to a nursing home, and four months later she had died.

At the recollection of his mother's death Barnes shivered a little, then realised that it was the icy wind lashing across the Square that had chilled him. The café windows were brilliantly lit and he heard the sound of a tango. Reluctantly he turned his back on it, then trudged over the Square, his shoes crunching in the snow under the plane trees. In the foyer the centrally-heated air touched his face like warm hands; it smelt

of dust and hot metal, but as he took off his hat and coat he was glad of it. It was like coming home, to feel that heat waiting for him after the bitter air in the darkness outside.

"Did you have a good walk, Meinheer?" the hall porter asked him. Barnes nodded and glanced at the letter-racks. The porter smiled and shook his head.

Barnes took off his overcoat, shook the snow from its shoulders and climbed the staircase to his bedroom. The curtains had been closed. The light on the bed-head flushed the pillow-slips a soft pink, like the wash of blood beneath a young girl's cheeks. Within a few moments of pressing the switch, the electric fire glowed invitingly.

The clock on the Palace tower chimed seven. They would soon begin serving the dinners downstairs, and Barnes wondered if he could manage another meal. It would be the best thing he could do. Hot food had always given him reserves of energy, boosted his morale; in fact, when he wasn't drinking he had a voracious appetite—a cooked breakfast, hot lunch, afternoon tea and another cooked meal with which to finish the day. Then he was able to jump from his bed in the mornings, glad to be alive, to be faced with another twelve hours in which he could get on with his work, formulate new plans, pursue his new and exciting ideas. Now, however, in the very heart of this alcoholic vortex, he awoke at three or four in the morning, his heart half strangled by despair, his pulses morse-coding their jangled message of terror, his shaking hands reaching for the inevitable antidote. For the half-hour between waking and the moment when brandy took possession of him he wished he were dead, that his heart had stopped its insane beating in his sleep. Instead, he was faced with the prospect of another day of misery and semi-consciousness, another twelve hours nearer the final disaster.

There was a knock at the door and the chambermaid peered round its edge. "Excuse me, Meinheer. I came to turn down the bed."

"Carry on," Barnes said. He hadn't attempted to hide his bottle. What was the point? They must all know the pattern he followed. Absently Barnes watched the girl's strong ankles, the outline of her thighs beneath her white coat.

"I haven't seen you in the hotel before," he said at length. He had seen her, of course, but you had to say *something*.

"I have been here for over a year," she answered, and smiled down at Barnes, showing square, clean teeth, and an attractive face in spite of its rather strong jaw. She wore lipstick, and a touch of powder on her red cheeks. From her body came the unmistakable smell of carbolic soap blended with some cheap perfume in all probability given away as a sample by some woman's magazine.

"Will you join me in a drink?" Barnes asked, and held up the bottle.

"Cognac," she answered, "very nice, but a little strong for me, Meinheer," and she glanced over her shoulder at the open door.

"Close it," Barnes demanded.

"It is against the housekeeper's rules. When we are in the bedrooms we must always keep the doors open."

"Why?"

She giggled. "In case the guests are naughty. It has been known, even in *this* hotel."

"Why even in *this* hotel?"

"It's a bit of a dump, after all. All we get here are old men with their women on a bit of a week's spree. But sometimes a business man from Rotterdam or Amsterdam comes here and wants a good time."

"And you give it to him?"

Without embarrassment she said, "It depends what he is like."

"I see," Barnes said. "Well, close the door for a few minutes, anyway. A cigarette, perhaps. . . ."

"Since the housekeeper is at dinner. . . ." The girl closed

the door softly, then sat on the edge of the bed watching Barnes curiously.

He hadn't the faintest interest in the chambermaid, yet here he was, offering her brandy, ordering her to close the door. Did the fact that she had obeyed him mean he was expected to make some decisive move? Her self-assurance, and contempt of this hotel seemed a sure enough sign that she was not unused to sexual advances.

Barnes took a drink straight from the bottle and for a second it seemed that there were three or four lights on the bed, which swung out of line, then came together again and just the one lamp glowed pinkly.

"What's your name?" Barnes asked.

"Gabrielle."

"Then you're French?"

"No, Meinheer, I am Dutch. My parents live in Alkmaar. They have a small dairy farm and make the most beautiful cheeses." She shaped a large cheese with her plump hands. "Beautiful cheeses . . . very famous. . . ."

"Then why didn't you stay there? A better life than this, surely?"

"No, no," she said, "in Alkmaar there is nothing. All they think of is cheese, cheese, cheese. Me, I like to have a good time now and then, to dance and have a little drink to make one merry, and find an intelligent boy." She laid her hands on her knees and the starched coat rustled like paper. "Cheeses are all right in their way, but for me, I like boys who don't smell of sour milk all the time."

Barnes fished in his pocket for his cigarettes. The girl accepted one, lit it and inhaled with the experience of a heavy smoker. She leaned forward with her chin cupped in her hands, her elbows on her knees. From where he sat on the floor, Barnes could see the pale flesh of her inner-thigh above the stocking-top. His blood stirred a little and the hand which clutched the brandy-bottle was quivering.

'I mustn't,' he told himself. 'It would be crowning madness with madness.' He was in enough trouble with the hotel authorities as it was. And it wasn't as if he wanted her. Quite the reverse. He preferred his own company, yet here he was, encouraging her, leading her to suppose that. . . .

As though to ward off the inevitable, he asked, "Don't your parents worry about you working in a hotel here in the Hague? They must know, have some idea. . . ."

"Some idea of what?"

"Well, that some of the male guests might make advances. Your father has probably stayed in hotels himself."

"Pouff! They've never been further than Rotterdam in their lives. On Tuesdays they sometimes go to the market at Purmerend and my father comes home drunk, which spoils the whole day. All they care about is the farm and the cows and making more cheese and more money. What do you think they want the money *for*? They never spend any, they don't believe in a girl having a good time. Some of the girls in my home town used to go to dances with the German officers during the Occupation, and after the war they were kicked out of the town. Why? All the boys had gone into the underground, and a girl has to do *something*."

She crossed her legs and revealed her outer thigh, round and firm, and the light gleamed on the suspender. "I was too young," she said, "but I would have done it. I don't see the harm. Just because there's a stupid war on doesn't mean a girl must waste all her life, does it?"

He was tempted to argue, but saw the uselessness of it. She was a peasant, this girl, out of her natural environment, drunk with town life, the little cafés, the whisper of men and women crouched in the darkness of a wall, forbidden pleasures in an hotel bedroom. To her, as a child, it must have seemed natural for the young women to dance with men in attractive uniforms, for the distinctions between friend and enemy would have meant nothing to her; in fact they meant very

little now, so much had been forgotten, or overlooked. What were Dachau or Belsen or Treblinka now? If they were mentioned at all it was as a joke amongst children, calling to one another, "You be good or Mamma will send you to the ovens at Belsen," and the children would scream with laughter, misbehaving in the hopes of being sent on this mysterious and exciting journey.

"So in place of your German officers, you have to play with the merchants from Rotterdam and Amsterdam?"

She repeated, almost angrily, "A girl has got to have *some* fun. I'm twenty-two and I've only been to three dances in my life, except the village hops, and you can't call them dances."

Margaret, on a different level, had been the same. The comfort of the fireside had meant nothing to her. She needed the stimulus of parties, of dances, of idle chatter which bored Barnes to distraction.

"Dances aren't everything," he said. "There's more to life than jigging round and round a dance floor."

"Such as?"

He hadn't a ready answer to that question. What *was* there in life, now he came to think of it?

He raised himself from the floor, walked round the bed and lay down full length. Again the girl's face was above him, and he saw for the first time that she had blue eyes and a large dimple on her left cheek. Her fair hair was combed in two little curls on her forehead; through half-closed eyes they might have been the stubs of pale horns growing beneath the skin.

"It's all very well for you," she said, "you come from London, I dare say, and they tell me that all kinds of wonderful things happen there. A girl can enjoy herself without all the neighbours tat-tattling about it. A girl-friend of mine went into service in a place called Brixton, and she came home a year later with a baby, but she didn't care. She said it was the best year of her life, and she wanted to go back."

"To Brixton?" Barnes asked.

She looked at him suspiciously. "Yes, to Brixton. That's near London, isn't it? Well, *I'd* like to go there, too, and I wouldn't care if I came back with a baby either."

Barnes could picture Brixton High Street on a Saturday, the morning shoppers roughly hustling one another, the crowded buses with unsmiling faces pressed against the windows, the stench of unwashed bodies in Woolworths and Marks and Spencers, the hoardings with their advertisements for Bovril and Cadbury's chocolate and Gordon's gin, the ghastly over-refined accents of the assistants and floor-walkers in the big stores. . . .

"If you take my advice, which you won't," Barnes said, "I'd stick to Holland. I don't somehow think you'd like Brixton very much."

"I'd like anywhere except this hole," she said defiantly. Within a few minutes she had grown quite accustomed to Barnes, was treating him as an equal. His seat on the floor, the half empty brandy-bottle, his restless eyes peering beneath her skirt (his glances had not been lost upon her) had been the common denominators. "Perhaps I will have a little drink now."

"What about the housekeeper?"

"She'll still be stuffing herself down below. As for us, we're lucky if we get a bite to eat before ten o'clock."

Barnes poured some brandy into his tooth-glass, then leaned on his elbow and watched the girl drink it. She tossed the spirit down as though the taste was repulsive; she choked, and her eyes filled with water. Giggling, she dabbed them with a corner of the sheet.

"They say you drink an awful lot," she said.

"Who is 'they'?"

"Oh, everybody—the other girls, the waiters, all of them. I don't know how you can bear it. It burns so."

"You get used to it. What else do 'they' say?"

"That you've had an unhappy love affair," she giggled once more, "but they say that about every man who stays here and has too much to drink."

How near the truth she was, Barnes thought. His parting with Jan had shaken his life into chaos, like a jigsaw puzzle rattled in its box. The only difference was, his pieces wouldn't fit together. Perhaps some of the more complicated bits had become mixed with Jan's, and only together could they ever make an intelligible picture.

"Have you ever been in love?" She put out an exploratory finger and smoothed his black, thick eyebrows.

"I suppose so," Barnes answered. "I imagine we all have at some time or another. I was in love with my governess when I was seven years old."

"No, come on, be serious. In love like you read about in the magazines. When you can't eat or sleep for thinking of someone. You *know*. These writers are always writing about it."

"Well, then, they must have been in love. How about you, Gabrielle, have you loved?"

"Love!" she said, and curled her lips. "How would I know anything about it where I come from?"

"Why not?"

"*Why not!* All the boys in our town know about is milking cows or building dung-heaps. *Their* idea of love is to get a girl down in the fields after supper and get their hands up her skirt. That's all they ever want. I suppose it's watching the animals all the time. All they think of is getting your knickers off and playing moo-cows and big strong bulls. *Love!*"

"Then why did you ask me, if that's all you think of it?"

She sighed. "I thought it would be so different in a city like the Hague, away from those animals. I thought the men would know what love really is. Like my girl-friend in Brixton, she met an English boy she went mad about. It was his baby, and she wants to go back and marry him. She's saving up for a trip back next year to see him. The only trouble is. . . ."

She paused, then held the glass out for another drink.

“ . . . the only trouble is?” Barnes prompted.

Gabrielle thought a moment, then said, “Well, for the first month or two after coming back, she heard from him regular. Then the letters from him stopped, and the last she wrote came back marked *Address Unknown*. Maybe he’s had to go after a job in another town. Seems funny, though, and he was such a lovely boy. I seen his picture.”

The flashy youths in their absurd clothes in the Brixton High Street at night, clustering in small groups outside the dance hall, whispering obscene remarks to girls as they passed, yelling in the cinemas, swaggering along to the greyhounds. *Address Unknown*. How often must it have happened before, the quick fumbling in the dark, the seconds of frenzied pleasure, the shock of pregnancy, the utter relief when the girl had to return to her own country. “*You bet I’ll write every week, sweetie, and when the baby’s born I’ll have a trip over to meet your folks and we can get married. No, we can’t now, ducks, we haven’t got the cash. But I’ll save, so help me God, I’ll save every penny. Now, you write regular, eh? Let me know how the baby is coming along, and I’ll write regular, too. . .*” *Address Unknown!* The youth, with a fresh swagger, telling his mates in the pub that he had at last got rid of her, could come back in the gang again. “*She was only a lousy foreigner, after all, boys. If they come over here for a good time, they got to expect to pay somethin’ for it.*”

Barnes lit another cigarette and flicked the match towards the fireplace. He missed, and it lay smouldering on the carpet.

“Yes, Gabrielle, perhaps he had to go to another town, as you say. But I’d tell your friend not to waste her savings looking for him.”

“But she’s got to,” Gabrielle said indignantly, “he’s the *father!* He’s got to marry her. In any case, he promised he would, I seen it in one of the letters, so he will. He’ll come over here, even if she can’t get back to Brixton.”

Both of them paused as footsteps padded down the corridor. They went past, and the bathroom door at the end of the passage slammed shut.

Gabrielle sighed, then grinned down at him. Barnes reached for her shoulders, and pulled her beside him on the pillow. He unfastened the buttons on her starched coat and looked at the large, pear-shaped breasts straining at the silk under-slip. He took one in the palm of his hand, fondling it, and suddenly her lips were pressed hard to his and her tongue forced his teeth apart. He could scarcely breathe, and he pulled himself from under her, so that they lay side by side.

With a quick movement she brushed his hand aside, pulled down the slip, fumbled with her brassière and her breasts lay naked on the silk, the firm flesh pink in the lamplight, crested by the pink nipples which Barnes hurriedly brushed with his lips. Yet he was empty of passion, detached from bodily urges. He liked her here provided she was quiescent. Even their absurd conversation was relaxing. Certainly he did not want her. Earlier, seated on the floor, when he had glimpsed the smooth thigh above the stocking-top he had felt the prickings of desire, but now that had departed.

Gabrielle put an arm about his head and drew his mouth to hers once more. He submitted, strangely embarrassed. Her hand moved gently over his body—touching his neck, the small of his back, his thighs, fumbling with his clothes. Barnes took her hand and held it against his chest. "The housekeeper," he whispered, "remember the housekeeper, Gabrielle."

She was panting like a runner out of breath. "I don't care about *her*," she whispered back fiercely. "She can go to hell, the bitch."

Barnes drew away from her, stretched for the brandy and gulped a mouthful. The girl knew she was being dismissed, and said through clenched teeth, "I thought the English were supposed to be gentlemen!"

'The coward in Barnes forced him to say, "I wanted to, but it's too dangerous for you. The housekeeper, the rest of the staff . . . they're bound to hear, and then where would you be?"

She turned on him in fury. "You needn't make excuses. I'm only a chambermaid, I know. Not good enough for an English gentleman. Well, you can take your English gentlemen and throw them in the Zuider Zee as far as I'm concerned." Here eyes filled with tears of rage and mortification. From long habit she picked up the pillows by the electric fire and arranged them on the bed. Then she turned down the sheets and eiderdown, sniffing all the time. Barnes took her arm, but she shook his hand off.

"Listen, Gabrielle," he said, "don't run away with any of those absurd ideas of yours. What's the harm in being a chambermaid?" And he added with bitterness, "At least you do a day's *work*, which is more than can be said for some people."

"I told you I didn't want any of your soft soap. I can look after myself, don't you worry about that."

There was a strange appeal in her flushed face, in the round, tear-filled eyes. Barnes would have liked her to come back later, to lie beside him through some of the worst night hours. Her warmth, her *aliveness*, was a sort of protection against the brutal images which, in the cold, early hours, would come to obsess him. But if she were there, he might hold them off, and he felt certain that if he could rid himself of them for one night without relying on alcohol, then he might banish them forever.

And if Gabrielle wanted him, as she obviously *had* wanted him, then he would do his best, he wouldn't disappoint her again.

Jumping from his bed he fumbled in his jacket and produced a five-guilder note. "Gabrielle," he said, "will you buy yourself a little something, a souvenir . . . and . . . would

you come back tonight . . . when they're all in bed? We won't have to worry then. The night will be ours, nobody to disturb us, nobody to know. . . ."

He held out the note, and she took it from him and threw it in his face.

"Keep your filthy money," she said, then went out into the corridor and slammed the door behind her.

CHAPTER 13

With Gabrielle gone Barnes felt more desolate than ever. She had been companionship of a sort, until she had made demands upon him. Then, at once, the relationship had become strained, all the old familiar tensions springing up. Even though he had invited her back in the night, he knew it would be useless. He would never relax with her now. Recollection of his refusal, when her body had been ready and willing for him, would keep them apart.

He went to the windows and drew aside the curtain. Snow fluttered through the beams of light from the street lamps, and the snow-covered masonry of the Palace turrets gleamed in the moonlight like tomb-stones.

People still walked the streets. Their overshoes left a trail of black footprints behind them, and one man, dressed in a brown overcoat and fur cap, reeled from one side of the pavement to the other, finally collapsing into a snow-drift under the plane trees.

From his window Barnes could make out the lighted windows of the café. There would still be music, and he supposed they would be serving meals until well after midnight. The urge to go over there was almost irresistible. All that prevented him was the question of money. If he ran up a bill and couldn't settle it, they would be certain to follow him back to the hotel. Equally certain was the fact that they would call in the police. You could fool a good hotel for a week or two, but you couldn't fool a restaurant over an unpaid dinner bill!

Barnes opened the window. The cold air struck his face like the touch of a damp cloth. Very faintly the sound of an

orchestra drifted over the Square. He stood motionless, his hands on the window-sill growing blue with the cold.

In his mind's eye he could see the dancing couples, the waiter's white cloth as he dusted the champagne-bottle before showing him the label, the glitter of heavy silver cutlery, the delicious smell of frankfurters and french-fried potatoes, the late-night snack they always served just before midnight.

It was his imagination, of course, but Barnes could *smell* those frankfurters, and his mouth watered. He felt the throb of music in his blood, and saw quite clearly his brother officers whirling round the dance floor with the Dutch girls they had won for themselves since entering Holland.

It was in the Club that he had first seen Jan. She had been with a Dutch officer and two civilians (the Dutch were allowed to use the British Club), and even in that crowd Barnes had noticed her at once. She had worn a scarlet sweater and dove-grey, pleated skirt. Her coal-black hair and dark eyes had attracted many glances, and Barnes knew immediately that he wanted to know her, to get to know her really well, for something in the appearance of her broad, cool-looking forehead, those flashing dark eyes, spoke of character and recklessness rarely found in a girl as beautiful as she.

Meeting her had been easy. A colleague of his had known the Dutch officer, and before he had gone back to his hotel that night, Barnes had arranged to take her to tea in the Club on the following afternoon.

When they left the Club a little after midnight, Barnes walked with Jan and her friends to the tram-stop.

"Do you live far? I could get the car out."

"A few minutes only," she answered. "Thank you, but it isn't worth it."

The Dutch officer was talking animatedly with the two civilians a few paces ahead of them. The heat of the day could still be felt in the sticky pavements and in the still air which had not yet been chilled by the night.

' "About tomorrow," Barnes said; "would you like me to come and pick you up?"

She shook her head, and her dark hair gleamed in the moon's soft light. "You'd never find it. Even friends from the Hague sometimes miss their way."

"I speak Dutch," he reminded her. "I can always ask the way."

"No," she said, "I'll meet you at the Club, as we arranged. I have to come into the Hague, anyway, to see my husband's solicitors. Now that he's abroad there are all kinds of difficulties about getting family allowances through."

Her husband's solicitor, family allowances. The words, coming so easily from her lips, depressed him. The air seemed a little colder in the Square, and the gaiety which had filled him earlier seemed to disintegrate into the surrounding darkness.

They had reached the tram-stop. Barnes shook hands with Jan's friends, then held hers in his own for a moment. "Tell me," he said, "would you do me a small favour?"

"So soon, Captain?" she answered, smiling, her white teeth shining in the light from the tram windows.

"Quite a simple one, not compromising in any way." He laughed too, and his feeling of depression vanished.

"Well," she said, and glanced quickly at her companions, who had already taken their seats, "quickly, then, we'll be off in a moment."

"I'd like you to wear the same clothes you have on now . . . that sweater, the skirt. Would you do that for me?"

She looked at him curiously. "What a funny man you are. Why? What's so wonderful about these clothes?"

"They just happen to appeal to me. They seem somehow right for you."

"All right, but I must go now. Until tomorrow."

"Until tomorrow."

The conductor clanged his bell. The tram lurched from side

to side as it accelerated along the narrow tracks. Finally, with a spray of bluish sparks from beneath its wheels it rounded a corner and disappeared from sight. Barnes walked back to the hotel in which he was billeted with a contented mind. He had only been in the Hague for a week or two, and already he had found what he wanted. He was sure of it, just as sure as he had known, within a week of meeting Margaret, that he did not want her. These things so frequently happened in life . . . *click-click* . . . and within the mysterious motors of one's mind a set of cogs fell into place and whirled smoothly. Either that or they as quickly became dislodged, grinding away, tearing at the nerves with their hellish disharmony.

It was twelve-thirty before he reached the hotel, yet the Mess sergeant was still working in the bar.

"You're putting in a lot of overtime, Sergeant."

"NAAFI rations tomorrow, sir, and I don't 'ave time to see to 'em when the bar's open. Night-cap, sir?"

Barnes yawned. "No, thanks, I've an early start in the morning."

He turned to go, but the sergeant said, "There's some English mail for you, sir." He flicked through some letters tucked away beside his till, and handed two envelopes over.

"Thanks . . . good night."

Barnes glanced at the writing as he went upstairs. One was from Margaret. The sprawling, childish handwriting almost filled the envelope. The other, he knew, was from his tailor, doubtless persuading him that it was time he had a new Number One uniform. Would Margaret persuade him it was time he had a new Number One wife? That was more to the point. In twelve months' time he would be out of the Army, he had no use for new uniforms, but it would be a lot longer than twelve months before he was out of his marriage . . . *till death do us part*. . . . He was only twenty-eight and Margaret twenty-three. A whole lifetime stretched wearily ahead, a life of unspoken recriminations, of false courtesy, of

distasteful co-habitation, of tedious social intercourse. . . .

'Perhaps not,' Barnes thought. 'Perhaps I shall have the courage *not* to go through with it.' For that was where the courage lay—to face the futility and break it into a thousand pieces before you were lodged in the rut.

He climbed the first flight of stairs and opened a door on the right. He had a spacious double bedroom, beautifully furnished. A rich blue carpet covered the floor, and a wall divan and two easy chairs made one feel at home, unaware of the transitory atmosphere so common to hotels. Twin basins and a *bidet* were fitted in the wall, the wardrobes, dressing-table and occasional tables were of mahogany, smooth as satin. Through the curtains in the wall by the door was his private bathroom with its concealed lighting, the spotless bath, the gleaming chromium of taps and shower. Everything was expensive, in good taste, just as Margaret would like, and as he would never be able to afford. The top shelves of his wardrobes, for example, were filled with bottles of the finest wines and spirits—vintage champagnes, hocks, burgundies, liqueurs, whiskies, cognacs and gins—all accumulated from the weekly NAAFI rations which cost him almost nothing. But it bought him comfort and luxury, for the Dutch were desperately short of drink. For a bottle of whisky and four bottles of gin he could stay for a long week-end at the best hotels in Scheveningen or at the luxurious hotel on the beach near Noordwijk.

Barnes took off his shoes, unbuttoned his tunic and lay back on the silk sheets. For a minute he fondled the silk and looked at the costly wallpaper, the hand-made furniture. 'The Army is spoiling me,' he thought. 'I shouldn't be here at all. The war's over now. I oughtn't to be wasting my time in a place like this. If I had any sense I'd be out of the Army and making a start in some sort of life in civvy street. The best jobs will be gone when I begin looking, and what then? A clerk in an office at ten pounds a week, inky fingers and shining cuffs, the bus queue at eight-fifteen and luke-warm tea in the cracked

cup at eleven? The interminable week-ends at home, with Margaret fumbling and panting in her weekly demand in the dawn hours of Sunday morning. . . .

Somebody rapped on the door and came in. It was Major Watts, tousle-haired, in pyjamas and dressing-gown. He occupied the next room.

"I thought I heard you come in." He seated himself on the edge of the bed and waved an admonitory finger. "Been out on the tiles, my boy, that's where *you've* been. We saw you in the Club tonight with that dark piece, and very nice too. You haven't wasted much time, Barnes, that's for sure. I must say I haven't seen her there before." He shook his head sadly, a little drunkenly. "It's an astonishing thing, Barnes, but I've been in this damned country over a year now and I only see the nicest pieces when some bastard like yourself comes over from the U.K. and pinches her from under my nose."

"Have a drink," Barnes suggested. The major nodded, poured two whiskies and said in a lugubrious voice, "Here is the opportunity for me to have the best time in my life . . . *the best, Barnes* . . . plenty of food, plenty of comfort, women for the asking, money to spend, loot to sell, and what am I doing?" He raised his glass, spilt half the whisky on his tunic and sipped noisily. "I do nothing but eat and drink and spend half my day sleeping like a pig, Barnes, just like a bloody pig." He jerked up on the bed, took a cigarette from the box Barnes held forward and continued angrily, "In a year's time I'll be cursing myself for this wasted opportunity, cursing my lousy soul for not having taken advantage of all the fun." He sucked the end of his cigarette until the paper was a brown pulp. His voice was a little slurred, "The war's over, right? We fought in the war, right? Good, then this is our reward . . . a few months in Holland, living like kings, with the Dutch ready and willing to do anything we ask them, and what do we *do*? Nothing, not a damned thing. And I'm fifty-seven. This is the last chance *I'll* ever get for a fling, and the moment *you* get

here, you son of a bitch, you swipe the nicest bit in the Club."

The major lurched over to the whisky bottle and helped himself to another drink.

"A bit of luck," Barnes said. "I happened to know someone who was pally with the Dutch officer. That's how it goes."

The major ignored him. "My wife's over fifty," he moaned, "she's white-haired and dignified and *finished*. She gives tea-parties. . . ." He raised his eyes to the ceiling and groaned. "Christ, those tea-parties. You ought to see 'em, the vicar's wife, the doctor's old woman, the honorary secretary of this and the honorary secretary of that, and they all sit on the edge of their seats and *hold their little fingers out*. . . ."

"Why do you go to them?"

"I've been going for twenty-six years," the major yelled. "I have to go."

"Perhaps when you get back, out of uniform, you'll get used to it." The inky fingers, the shiny cuffs, buses, trams, the chipped cup at eleven. Was it possible? But then the human animal is supposed to get used to anything.

"Used to it be damned," the major said, then added almost wonderingly, "Yet do you know, Barnes; before the war, before I joined up, I think I enjoyed my life."

"What were you?"

"Don't laugh, but I was a bank manager. Not a big branch, you understand, but quite a nice place in a country town. We used to be invited to little cocktail parties, and we used to give 'em, now and then. The farmers were a good crowd, always trying to borrow money, of course, but you expected that. My wife liked the retired people, the so-called landed gentry. They used to fool *her*, but they couldn't fool me. I knew too much about their bank accounts. Still, I enjoyed it. I liked the garden, my little car, my two weeks' holiday at the sea. But now . . ." he shrugged his shoulders hopelessly, "how the hell can you go back to that after six years in the Army, after eighteen months of *this*?"

"You'll have to," Barnes said. "What else is there?"

The major belched, then drained his glass at a gulp. "I asked for a permanent commission. Imagine that! At my age I had the gall to ask for a permanent commission."

"What did they say?"

"They told me to get stuffed."

Barnes had entertained the same idea, until he had realised that a career in the Army with Margaret tagging along would be intolerable. If they had to continue in their vacuum, better to cut themselves off than exist like that in a small community.

"It's all right for you," the major said morosely, "you're young. You can get to hell abroad when you come out, make a new life. You could clear off with that little piece you had in the Club. But when you're fifty-seven it's a different matter. Did I tell you my wife had white hair? Yes, white as snow, God-dammit. The sight of it makes me feel *old*." He hauled himself off the bed, straightened his shoulders and tried to pull his belly in. "Out here I feel younger," he hiccupped and his brows wrinkled angrily. "A man's only as old as he feels, and I don't feel a day over forty *out here*. At home, yes, I feel *old* . . . that white hair, you know . . . so by rights I ought to stay here. But how, without Army pay?" He took a fresh cigarette and held the burning match two inches away from its end, puffing in vain. "Do you know, Barnes, ten months ago I found myself a lovely little girl friend in Rotterdam, and for the first fortnight I couldn't do a thing. Not a bloody thing. It was like being with my daughter. It seemed like incest to touch her. But after the fortnight she made me feel young, young. Then I was all right. I had a wonderful time. I felt like a kid again. But if my wife's white hair had appeared, I'd have been impotent on the spot. See what I mean, a man's as old as he feels, no older."

"Well," Barnes said, "you aren't going home for a few months, so stay young. Make the best of it. Where is she now if she keeps you young?"

"She went off with a Belgian cavalry officer, the bitch. Walked right out on me after we'd been staying for four days on holiday in Brussels. I came home alone and it was just as if the wife's bloody white head was leaning against the opposite seat. I swear it, I was a hundred years older."

"You'll find another."

"That's just it," the major said. His face twisted as though he were in pain, "That's just it, I want to find another, *but I just can't be bothered*. The rot's set in. I know I have to go back to that white head and the bank and the tea-parties and those bloody simpering women with their bloody simpering jokes." He pouted his lips and mimicked, "Are you *really* the bank manager, Mr. Watts? Oh, dear, we *must* get to know each other better." The major scowled and banged his cigarette in the ash-tray. He spread his fingers out and held his hand in front of Barnes' eyes. It trembled violently. "That's drink," he explained, "too much bloody booze. And why? Because I feel so hopeless, so bloody desperate. You'd think that once the Army had demoralised you, the least they could do was keep you in and let you wilt in *their* garden."

He made his way unsteadily to the door and paused with his fingers on the handle. "Have pleasant dreams, my boy, pleasant dreams. Will you be in the Club tomorrow morning?"

"Probably," Barnes answered.

"Then I'll see you, and remember, if you tip the head-waiter a guilder he'll give you cognac in your coffee, even at nine o'clock."

Barnes undressed, put on his pyjamas and slid in beneath the warm sheets. He had seen many men like the major, frightened now that the end of their service had come within sight. If you had two years left, eighteen months, even a year, you could bury your head in the sand and forget about it. But when it was a matter of only a month or two it couldn't be ignored. Then you were compelled to face the awful task of mental re-adjustment. And the fool's escape in alcohol was no

answer. He had seen his father attempt *that* line of retreat, and he was witnessing it again in the major.

But his turn was to come, and how the hell would *he* face it?

Jan was already seated by the windows when Barnes entered the Club on the following afternoon. He did not enter at *once*, but stood by the entrance watching her. The afternoon sunshine spilled through the windows, accentuating the darkness of her hair, sharpening the outline of the breasts which swelled beneath the woollen jumper. She was not a pretty girl, Barnes thought. Her face was too strong, too filled with her character to be pretty. It was lovely, just as her well-developed, healthy body was lovely. Her legs were crossed and one could see quite plainly the outline of the strong thigh, the good knees. Barnes judged her to be twenty-five or six, provocative, fiery, well-bred and probably self-willed: the sort of girl he wanted, *the* girl he wanted.

He went over and sat down.

She smiled with pleasure. "Exactly on time, Captain Barnes, and I had expected you to be late. Major Braus told me how hard the British Mission worked."

"Major Braus?"

"Yes, the Dutch officer I was with last night. He is being trained by your people, in artillery, it seems."

Barnes ordered tea and toast. Jan continued, "Doesn't it seem the height of absurdity that with the war only over ten months or so men should already be learning the best way to slaughter one another?"

"Life goes on, humans go on, so war goes on," Barnes said, "but at this moment no war goes on, so let's enjoy ourselves. In any case, I should have thought you'd had enough of war without wanting to talk about it."

She had. The years of Occupation had spelt disaster for her people. Starvation, disease and slaughter had wrecked their bodies, subservience and slavery their souls. But slowly they

were emerging, nourishing themselves physically, and falteringly regaining their independence.

Jan's husband, it appeared, was a dental-surgeon in the Army, but had practised as a civilian in the war years. As payment he had succeeded in getting little extras—a handful of potatoes here, a vegetable or a couple of eggs there. Now he was back in the Dutch Army, earning guilders in place of cabbages and little bags of runner-beans. The only trouble was, there was nothing to spend the guilders on.

"The shops are still empty," Jan said. "One can't buy new clothes or shoes or really good food yet. They're rationed, very strictly, and as for the black market . . . well, we aren't all millionaires."

"But there's plenty to be bought in Belgium," Barnes said. "When I go down to Brussels the shops look full to bursting. No rationing there."

"Ah, Brussels." She said it as though it spelt an impossible fantasy.

"Would you like to go down with me one week-end? I often motor down. . . ."

"It's too good to believe." She laughed gaily, like a school-girl promised a holiday treat. "To think of shops filled again, with things that one can buy. . . ." Her dark eyes met his and held them steadily. "It's very sweet of you, but are you quite sure you want to take me? There must be many others who would like the chance."

"I want to take you," Barnes answered. Her sharp, eager eyes fascinated him. He looked down at the wedding ring on her finger. "The fact that you're married doesn't matter. There aren't any strings attached to this."

Yet there were. He knew that he wanted to love this girl. And she, as though aware of his need, answered, "After years of ropes and chains, what are strings?"

But more than Brussels, with its rich foods and night-clubs

and dancing till dawn, they enjoyed the week-ends in the hot weather in a tiny hotel they had discovered outside Noordwijk. It lay on the side of a sand track only a few hundred yards from the beach, and here they would go on a Friday evening, and swim and lounge about the hotel and its rocky little garden until the following Monday morning. Frequently they were the only guests, and Barnes, who brought the proprietor a bottle of gin, was a special customer.

One evening, before supper, they went out and sat on the rockery which sprawled fifteen or sixteen feet down to an untidy lawn. The air was stifling, unmoving, as though awaiting the storm. Barnes had brought a bottle and two glasses and poured them each a Bols gin. "Nice, nice, nice," Jan said, and set her glass against one of the rocks. "I wonder just why we love this place so much. After all, it isn't that exciting, is it?"

"For us it's exciting. In Brussels the excitement's manufactured and sold to you for what you can pay. Here . . . well, here we make our own, for free."

She laughed at him, her teeth as white and healthy as the whites of her eyes in that sun-browned face. "Oh, we make our own, that's the truth . . ." The smile left her face. ". . . But as for being free! It's anybody's guess, but mine would be that it won't be free at all. There's a reckoning coming somewhere, sometime. I think we must pay for it."

"Pay for it? How? Why? We're entitled to some sort of contentment, aren't we? And we're hurting no one. . . ."

"We don't want to hurt anyone," she said, "that would spoil it. It would pull us apart in the end, I know it would."

"If one had a conscience," Barnes said, "yes, if one had a conscience it might do that. Otherwise . . ." he left the sentence unfinished.

"There's no otherwise" Jan took him up. "We have consciences, both of us. Perhaps you don't think you have, but

you *have*. I know it here," and she touched her breast. "I know all kinds of secret things right here."

From the direction of the sea thunder rumbled. The air was no longer still. A breeze ran in little steps through the grass and bent the blades back.

"There's time enough for consciences later on," Barnes said, and helped Jan up. "We have months ahead of us, my darling, so let's not start regretting things *now*."

She stood at his side and took his arm. Her brief white shorts were dust-covered from the rockery, and as he patted them, clean the contact of his hand with her buttocks, with her strong naked legs, burned a deep *café-au-lait* by the sun, was like a burn which seared through him and set the big pulse in his stomach quivering.

During supper the storm reached its climax. Thunder crashed overhead and shook the very foundations of the hotel. Fork lightning slashed the clouds, whipped blue weals on their grey under-bellies and darted for the horizon.

Jan came round the table and stood close to Barnes. He put an arm round her, and the softness of her hair touched his throat and he smelt its fragrance. A fork of lightning thrust its way seawards, and in its blue light Barnes glimpsed the pale outline of Jan's neck. He touched it with his lips, and only then became aware that she was trembling.

"Does it worry you?" he whispered.

"No. . . . No, it doesn't bother me. Not really."

Her voice had the curious quality of an echo, vibrating somehow, as though she fought an excitement which might get out of control.

The lights went out; the hotel-owner came in with candles and placed them on the tables. "I am so sorry, ladies and gentlemen, a small matter of a fuse. Nobody's fault, you understand. An act of God, as one might say."

"Act of God, act of God?" an old man at a corner table asked testily. "Then who pays for the rent of these rooms, may

I ask? God? If he pays the rent then he might do his acts, but for *my* room he don't pay. Gas, gas . . . for what you want electricity and your acts of God? Answer. Electricity . . . with sparks, with shocks, with fires . . . that's your electricity! Me, I've had gas for thirty years and never fuses and acts of God with it. Is that right, Marthe?"

"Ah, yes," the proprietor agreed. "Gas, there's a lot to be said for it. But electricity is so convenient, you know. Any moment now the lights will be perfectly in order."

The old man grabbed his walking-stick and banged its ferrule on the parquet floor. He was becoming excited and shouted in a hideous mixture of Flemish and Dutch. "Conveniences, who speaks of conveniences, may I ask? Conveniences is lavatories, right? Who asked about lavatories, eh, who? Not me, I speak mit gas what we've had thirty years mivout your acts of God and dark like a black cat. How do I get up to mine room, how, how? Not mit electricity. Und I pay for my room, not God to do his acts in. . . ."

"Come along, dear," his wife said, and led him to the door. The proprietor grabbed a candle and went ahead of them. Sharp detonations rumbled along the coast-line, and the old man's voice could be heard shouting on the stairs, ". . . conveniences . . . what next. . . .?"

Jan, within Barnes' arms, was trembling still. He held her a little away from him and their twin shadows danced grotesquely on the wall. Her breasts swelled as she drew in her breath. The pupils of her eyes were black as coal, and they dilated as he watched, dilated and burned with strange fire. When a peal of thunder rolled they contracted to small mirrors which reflected the fluttering spear-heads of the candles.

"Don't *you* mind it?" she asked.

"I like it," Barnes said, "it gives me pleasure in some way. It has such strength, such tremendous vitality."

It was true. Storms had always held a fascination for him. Even as a small boy he had always jumped from his bed when a

storm had come in the night. He would sit at the windows for hours, wrapped in the eiderdown, watching the cruel play of the lightning, fearing, yet enjoying, the brutal crash of the thunder.

"Strength?" Jan questioned. "Vitality? Only that?"

"Yes," Barnes answered, "that and something else. Something I doubt if I could quite explain to you. I can't really explain it to myself."

"A little fear, perhaps. It frightens me too. A storm has always terrified me, and yet . . . yet there is something about it."

The gale struck the hotel in sudden violence. The candles fluttered helplessly and pricked at the darkness. Jan took Barnes' wrist in unaccustomed strength. It felt as though some current flowed from her to him, as if she were receiving this storm element and supplying him with its power.

"Listen," Barnes said, "let's go out on the dunes and watch it."

"If only I dared," she said, "if I could bring myself to do that I might never be afraid again. And I want to go with you. It was like this in the German attacks, when they tore Rotterdam to pieces, tore it and burned it house by house." Her hands grasped his shoulders in the agony of memory. "For days and nights we heard nothing but the terrible crashing of their big guns, the bombs. God, those nights . . . you could see the flames in the sky, you could imagine the burning flesh . . . oh, it was dangerous and terrifying, yet you wanted to go out and look, just the same."

"If you feel like that . . ." he began, and thought, 'That damned war, those raids.' "If that's the way it affects you, perhaps we'd better not."

"Please," Jan said, "please, let's try it. With you I won't be afraid. I might even get over it, once and for all."

Outside, the gale struck hard as they crossed the sandy track and walked on the turf leading to the sand dunes. Blades of

livid flame slashed the storm clouds, showing for a moment flushed, bluish holes like gangrenous wounds. The thunder was continuous, like the last desperate cannonade of a retreating army.

Rain stung their faces, the roar of the sea and the ominous shape of the dark cloud on the horizon seemed to take possession of them.

They stood in the shelter of a sand dune, and in the vivid flash of the lightning watched the frothing white-horses racing towards the shore. All around them the wind clutched at the tops of the dunes, blowing the sand in streaming mares' tails along the beach.

Jan put her hands on Barnes' shoulders and raised herself on tip-toes to touch his rain-soaked hair with her lips.

"It isn't so bad when you come out and face it," she said.

"The war's over and done with," he said gently. "You haven't anything to worry about now, nothing at all. And the storm . . . why, it passes too. Everything in life moves away from you, if you don't try and hold it back. And you don't want to hold the war back, do you?"

"No, no," she said, and he felt the movement of her lips against the lobe of his ear. "No, never that. I lost my mother and sister in Rotterdam, that's the trouble now."

"The trouble now?" he repeated. "Why now?"

"It seems so wrong to forget. One shouldn't let those memories leave one too easily. It . . . it seems so . . . ungrateful."

"No, you're wrong, Jan. Remember the good times, the fun you always had with them. Don't try and hold violence inside you. It's over and done with, and *they* wouldn't want you to torture yourself."

"Don't think as highly of me as that," she said. "I don't torture myself. I just remember it in storms like this, when the thunder is like the thunder of guns and the lightning their fire." She buttoned his collar against the

'pricking rain and added, "Really it's because I'm a coward, that's the truth of it. The memories are of gun-fire and destruction, and they frighten me. I don't want to die like that. Or in their filthy prisons, with the Gestapo or the SS doing what they want with you before they kill you."

"Don't hold on to things. Let them go, Jan, let them go."

"It's so silly of me," she said, and gently bit the lobe of his ear. "And it isn't like me, is it?"

"No. We've known each other how long . . . three weeks? And all the time you've been such sweet company, such a dear person. . . ."

"And now?"

"Now you're worrying, and it's up to me to see you stop it."

"Well," she answered, and her voice was almost gay, just as it usually was, gay and a little mocking, with the little imps of laughter crinkling the skin at the corners of her eyes and mouth, "it doesn't thunder *every* night. In any case, I don't feel so . . . so cowed by it now."

"Or lonely?"

"Lonely . . . with you? Never, never, never, *never*. We have such fun, don't we? Such lovely times together? I believe we truly love each other, darling, not only in bed, but everywhere."

"But in bed especially," he teased.

"Especially, what an *English* word," she said, and savoured it on her tongue. "Especially, yes, in bed especially."

Lowering his head Barnes kissed the white, soaking line of her throat above her collar. Then his lips searched for hers, touching the smoothness of chin and nose, and finding their open softness. She strained closer, insistent, her hands framing his face, and he held her lips for long seconds crushed wickedly to his own.

Lightning flickered miles behind them, and the thunder was little more than a growl from hidden parts of the land. The sand shook with the force of the white-horses pounding up the

dunes, and the continuous hissing of the undertow was like the sound Barnes remembered when his mother had held a shell to his ear at home and told him he could hear the ocean singing.

In sudden tenderness, Barnes held Jan closer, and with one hand unfastened her rain-coat and together they slid down in the soft sand and there was a kind of madness in the sand, and in them too. Closer she came to him, while the storm, breaking out above them once more, shattered them with its beauty and terror, its speed and madness, forcing them closer still, welding them in a mighty grip until, like the electric spearheads above, they had flashed together, and were one.

CHAPTER 14

From somewhere along the hotel corridor came the sound of a radio tuned into Luxembourg:

*Somewhere over the rainbow
Blue-birds fly,*

*If birds fly over the rainbow
Why, then . . . oh, why . . . can't I?*

The chambermaid had banged her way out of the room an hour since, yet Barnes still lay on his back on the bed and his thoughts were becoming morose. The room was too hot, for he had closed the windows and the three bars of the fire were glowing. His stomach felt as though it were on fire too. Its walls seemed to be inflamed, and he had a suspicion that the ulcer was bleeding. Perhaps the lunch earlier in the day had been a mistake, yet the doctor in London had told him he must eat; but light meals, at regular intervals. *His* regular intervals usually consisted of two or three days, so was there much to be surprised at if the ulcer played up?

*If birds fly . . . over the rainbow
Why . . . why, then . . . oh, why . . . can't I?*

He recalled once, when he had sat on the beach at Noordwijk with Jan after a light summer shower, they had seen a double rainbow, its lofty arcs crossed over the sea, and he had hummed that very song and she, listening to the words, had said, "But which to cross? Which to choose, h'm?"

He had shrugged his shoulders. "Which? Does it matter?"

They say man's paradise lies over the rainbow's shoulder."

"Over one, but over the other also? Might not one be the hell, and the *other* the heaven. The Fallen Angel's garments were said to be as brilliant as any of those of the Archangels. Couldn't he throw *his* mantle over the sky to lure us to *his* domain?"

"You have to take your chance," Barnes answered. "Everything in life's a chance, so I suppose there must be chances in death, too."

The shower had calmed the sea, and the waves gently scratched the sand. The horizon was a sharp line of light over the miles of green swell.

"When I was a little girl," Jan said, "I truly believed that you could take a boat and row right out to the horizon, and when you reached it it was a brightly-painted wall, so that you had to turn the boat and give a push against the wall and row home again. Strange, the things we believed in, and how angry we were, and how sad, when we had to learn the truth. Like learning that good fairies were only in Grimm's tales, and that Santa Claus was father creeping into the bedroom after midnight and pinning the stockings on the end of the bed."

"Life is a thief you have to come to terms with. But it's as well to know what he's robbed you of, just the same."

"I know what I've been robbed of. I know it through my two children. When you see what they believe in, what they hope for, what they *love*, then you can see love, and feel it, before life's had a chance to pummel it into horrible shapes and drag it along the gutter."

"Don't get too sentimental," Barnes warned her. "A child's so-called love is largely greed, greed for its mother's milk, for comfort and warmth, for bright baubles to play with."

Jan's black eyes glowed. "Why does it please you so much to reduce every feeling to base impulses? Surely you've seen some innocence, *somewhere*? Or don't you value it? Is your palate so jaded that everything tastes the same?"

"Pretty well the same, yes. When your diet's been rank meat since you could remember, it's difficult to taste the subtleties of refined cooking. And six years of war is a rank diet, as you well know. Not to mention twelve years watching a gentle woman die of paralysis, and twelve years is a hell of a long time to die." He spoke with a kind of apology for belittling the virtues of what she termed innocence.

She turned on her side in the sand, her thighs and shoulders burned a deep brown by the sun, gleaming with the lotion he had rubbed on earlier in the morning.

"I know, I know. But it's all over and behind you now."

"Of course it is," he interrupted her, "which is the reason I think time is such a bitch. They say time's a healer, that's true, but it's a bitch also."

"Why?"

"Why?" he repeated, "*why?* Because time lets you forget, and it steals all your gratitude away, and when you've no gratitude left the hardness eats in, and I detest hardness and I hate ingratitude. Look at me, as an example. For those twelve years I had a mother who lived for me and for my father. She loved us, and only wanted our happiness. That's *true*. She didn't care a damn about her own illness, unless in some way she thought it interfered with our pleasure. She never complained—I never heard one serious grumble from that woman's lips in all the years I knew her. I worshipped her, and so did my father. And yet. . . ."

"Yes," she prompted him, "and yet. . . ."

Barnes dug his fingers into the sand, scooped a handful and let it trickle away like an hour glass. "And yet now, after all these years, I don't seem to know her any more. I scarcely remember her, and she doesn't mean any more to me than one of those grains of sand trickling out there."

"I don't believe you. You remember things about her . . . things you loved."

"If I force myself," Barnes agreed, "but I have to use force

to remember. And when I do, I ask myself why, why bring it all back? Then I forget again. It's all too easy."

"And just as well," Jan answered. "If time didn't heal, one couldn't survive the pains."

"I'm not disputing that. I'm merely pointing out that to me ingratitude is a cardinal sin, and a sin we all commit without being able to help it. And the power to forget doesn't make us better people, or live better lives."

Two gulls glided low over the water and settled with a flutter of wings on the sand a few feet from where they lay.

"Perhaps you're right," Jan said, "and what about us? Do you think we'll forget our time together? Can we do that, do you think?"

Barnes lit a cigarette and flicked the spent match at the sitting gulls. One of them investigated the charred stem and gave a squeak of displeasure.

"I suppose so," Barnes answered, "though it doesn't seem likely at the moment. We have such a lot, you and I. Perhaps we're a little different from other people, a little mad, in some way, a trifle unbalanced."

"Speak for yourself," Jan laughed. "Personally I've always considered myself perfectly normal."

"Even with Rudolf?"

Rudolf was her husband's name, and she always pronounced it with a long *u*, making it sound rather German, as though she found it distasteful and did not wish it to be too closely associated with her own language.

She said little about him, but Barnes gathered it had been a marriage arranged by their families, and that she didn't like Rudolf too much. Certainly she had confessed that for the past three years they had not lived as man and wife. She said that she found his sexual advances repellent, they closed her up in some way, made her body ice-cold and stiff and froze her mind too. In the end Rudolf had desisted and they slept in different rooms. Yet he was prepared to live with her on those terms—

she despising his body, and he desiring hers. Inevitably they got on one another's nerves, and he spent all his time trying to placate her. He hadn't it in him to have a good fight and get it over with. Always he compromised, compromised, and always she disliked him a little more for it. It had been a blessing when, after the war, they had posted him to the Dutch East Indies. They were both relieved—she because she was rid of him for a while so that she wouldn't constantly have his presence jarring on her nerves; he, because he liked to believe that a prolonged absence might heal the thousand and one little suppurating wounds.

"Don't tell me that normality is separate rooms, jangling nerves, physical revulsion and living together to keep face," Barnes said.

"Think of the thousands that live like that. A friend of Rudolf's, a doctor friend of his once told me that six out of every ten marriages are balanced on that fragile pivot."

"Perhaps," Barnes said. "He should know. I suppose they go to him and lay their hearts bare. But it's also worth considering that the other four marriages out of your ten are based on sexual desires, and the man and wife haven't anything in common other than *that*. Which is worse, eh? Ask your doctor friend that!"

"I suppose the better way is the way Rudolf and I lived," Jan said. "Sex wears itself out. After a time it's gone and finished with. And if there's nothing more than that in your marriage, the marriage is gone and finished too. Sex is a shallow reprieve, that's all. I treprieves for how long? Ten years? And what about the next twenty?"

"So you're partially happy with your Rudolf?"

It was her turn to dig at the sand with her brown, slender fingers. "No," she said, "you know I'm not. I'm happy with you . . . sometimes. . . ."

"Only sometimes?" Barnes teased.

"Yes, only sometimes . . . mostly often, that is. But when

you get those strange moods, the black times, I get frightened. I get frightened of loneliness, and when you're like that I'm more alone than if you weren't there. Can you understand that? When that dead mask comes over your face, when I *know* I can't reach you, then I'm more than by myself, I have the feeling that I've lost part of myself too, lost it in you. You've absorbed it, taken it into yourself and lost it for a time, just as you've lost yourself."

"You'd better get your husband's doctor friend to give you a tonic," Barnes said facetiously, yet he understood her feelings. He knew, for instance, that in those dark moods he wanted to hurt her, even destroy her in some way. He wanted to rid himself of her because he couldn't, ever, get rid of her, couldn't ever abandon the things within her that he needed so desperately. And so, in brutal spite, he needed to damage the precious qualities which he would never entirely possess. For a month, yes . . . for six months, a year . . . but then what? It had to end, sooner or later, and what chaos would that ending wreak?

"Have you a cigarette?"

He gave her one and lit it for her. As always, her fingers trembled a little. He had never known them to be quite still. In restaurants, in bars, his eyes always fixed themselves on that slight quivering. It endeared her to him in some way, as though she were unsure of life, hesitant to face the complex problems of their relationship and its inevitable end. She puffed the cigarette like an amateur, blowing the smoke through her red lips with a little popping sound, the glowing end a trifle unsteady, yet above it the dark eyes calm, confident, only flecked with the sparks of fire when he touched her, or showed in his own eyes that he desired her. And even in crowded places—in bars or cafés, in the beach, in the street, he could show his desire in his eyes and she would respond immediately, her eyes fiery, her hands trembling a little more.

Unexpectedly she stubbed the cigarette in the sand, jumped

to her feet and stood over him, her wonderful sun-burned thighs apart, her eyes half-closed, smiling at him. "Come on," she said, "into the water, and I'll race you out to the raft."

They came out of the sea some minutes later and lay panting on the hot sand. Salt water trickled down their faces, and small drops of it settled on the sprinkling of hair on Barnes' chest and glittered in the sun. Jan sat on her knees and rubbed him with a towel. Then she leaned over him and touched the skin over his collar-bones with her lips. Barnes could feel the heart of her body and, without looking, knew that her hands would be trembling.

"Isn't it time for tea?" she asked. "Oughtn't we to be . . . going up to change?"

"Let me dry you," Barnes said.

"Not here. . . . We must go and change . . . you can dry me upstairs."

They jumped to their feet and ran, hand in hand, over the warm dunes to the little hotel on the far side of the sandy track.

It was a far cry from the hot sands at Noordwijk, and Jan's and the tranquillity of the little hotel, to the wicked December blizzard which now obscured the Square and piled the snow inches high on the window-ledges and dimmed to misty yellow haloes the lamps outside the Palace gates. The cold made one feel even lonelier and more depressed than the warm weather, as though there lived beside you another enemy to fight. Even with Jan he had felt more at peace when they had walked in the sunlight, or had lain in bed at night with the windows wide open and heard, in the thickets, amongst the trees, the mysterious little sounds of summer life. The colours of summer pleased Barnes too—green foliage, the gold of harvest, the browns and greens and reds of the countryside, the blood-flecked sky in the evening. As a youth he had spent day after day in the summer tramping through fields and woodlands, always searching for fresh colours, subtle hues which he might, were he gifted enough, one day put truly on canvas and so capture for ever the strange delight with which they filled him. He was never lonely, in those days, although he was alone. The abundant gifts of nature were sufficient for him. The scent of wild flowers, the warm, friendly smell of animals, the knowledge that beneath the springy turf upon which he walked secret life thrust towards the light, held for him a great contentment.

The loneliness came when he knew for certain that he could not paint. His sketch-books were competent, nothing more; his water-colour sketches pretty, but without life or inspiration.

Lying now on his warm bed in the hotel, the pain in his stomach soothed by brandy, it was easy enough to regard that

discovery with objectivity, but at the time it had been a catastrophe, another failure in what had seemed a life of failures. Art had meant such a lot to him—it had meant companionship, a secret little world of his own, and even that had been denied him. This bitter disappointment, so important to him then, made him even more introverted, cut him further off from the youths who wanted his friendship but who, uneasy in his company, soon left him to his own devices. Barnes had confided in his mother; she, poor woman, conscious of the approach of death and blinded by her love for him, could not see the truth. She believed his strange moods, his 'dark periods', to be caused by her own illness, and so could not help him.

'Ah,' Barnes thought, 'if only I had known then what I know now, I could have helped her. I could have made life a little easier for her.'

It was true. She had died believing herself a failure to her son, when he could have made her see that the failure was himself.

Yet, paradoxically, he had been a brilliant scholar. He had matriculated without trouble, and had been outstanding at mathematics. At his father's wish he had studied engineering, had branched into metallurgy, and then had come the war. So many hundreds of thousands of promising careers had been smashed, yet so many had been salvaged after the hostilities. Then why hadn't his? He supposed that only he could answer that question, and yet he had no answer, none at all.

Somebody knocked on the door. Barnes called "Come in" and a porter handed him a letter.

"It came by the evening post, Meinheer. The hall porter asked me to bring it up."

Barnes nodded his thanks, and examined the envelope when the door had closed. He could not recognise the spidery handwriting, and was surprised to see an Amsterdam postmark. From his late head office? But how had they learned he was here?

He dropped the envelope on the bedside-table and lifted the telephone.

"What time is it?"

"Nine-fifteen, Meinheer."

Already half the evening gone. Then what should he do? It was too early to go to bed—even with the help of brandy he could never hope to sleep throughout the night. The thought of tossing and turning on the pillows for ten hours was incentive enough to make him get up and have a cold wash in the basin. Afterwards he helped himself to a stiff drink and put the half empty bottle in the suit-case beside the remaining two. Then he picked up the letter and his door-key and went downstairs.

There was a strange porter on duty, and Barnes nodded curtly as he crossed to the doors.

"Are you going out, Meinheer?" the porter asked, "It is snowing heavily. Your hat and coat. . . .?"

"I am only going across the Square," Barnes said, and pushed his way through the swing-doors.

The pavements and roads were inches deep in snow. Beneath the plane-trees it was banked prettily, like white towels around the necks of the tree trunks.

He passed the café which had been the Officers' Club and entered a small *estaminet* further down the road. In spite of the bad weather, most of the tables were occupied. The appetising tang of fresh-ground coffee mingled with the smell of damp clothes and Dutch cigars. Barnes sat at a table by the zinc-covered bar and ordered coffee and cognac.

Out in the Square eight or nine cars ploughed through the snow, nose to tail. A masonic meeting returning home, perhaps, or a crowd of friends going off to some party. Barnes would have liked to be going with them. He felt like company tonight. At least, he wanted people around him. Nine-fifteen! What sort of mental journey through those long hours before the dawn awaited him? He supposed he should take

himself in hand, get hold of a doctor to give him sleeping pills and have a good night's sleep. But he could not be bothered. He was once more in the hands of that damnable inertia. He consoled himself with the thought that the day after tomorrow he would go with de Groot to Amsterdam. That would be making some sort of effort, and one effort might lead to another.

The girl put his coffee and cognac in front of him. Barnes drained the glass and ordered another. The smell of the coffee no longer tempted him, and he pushed the cup away. In the summer, he thought, one could sit at a table out there on the pavement, and not be pestered by these revolting smells. There would be pretty girls in their summer dresses to take your mind off things. But he had thought all that before, a dozen times.

As he drank his second cognac his mind's eye pictured quite clearly a macabre incident which had happened to him on one of his week-ends in Brussels in 1946. But why should this recollection have flashed before him now? Because of the café, thoughts of tables out there on the pavement, earlier recollections of his failure as a painter?

The Brussels incident came flooding back, each little detail so clear-cut that it might only have happened yesterday. He had been seated outside the Chez Ernest, drinking coffee and brandy, as he was doing now, and his attention had been drawn to a strange man at the next table. Brussels had been too interesting a place to pay attention to commonplace little men seated alone at café tables unless some characteristic about them compelled your attention. But it was the man's hands which fascinated Barnes. They fluttered between the little percolator perched on his coffee-cup, his brandy-glass and the edge of the table-cloth. Every few seconds they would clasp one another, fingers entwining, thumbs pressing down on their backs. Then once more they would grasp the cup and bang it nervously on the saucer. They were never still, but seemed to possess some

secret, frantic life of their own, unrelated to their owner, and it seemed to Barnes that at any moment they might leave his arms and run berserk in an attempt to escape their captor.

It was certainly the unnatural energy of those limbs which made Barnes watch him. For the rest, the man looked no more exciting than a sedate little bank clerk or shopkeeper. Barnes judged him to be fifty-five or sixty years of age. His sandy hair was thinning, giving the domed forehead the appearance of jutting out on a bone-ridge above the eyes. His cheeks had at one time been plump, but now hung heavily like the jowls of a spaniel. And there was nothing in the face to suggest the extraordinary tension under which, as Barnes learned later, he had existed for many years.

Perhaps it might have been possible to read such signs in his eyes, but he wore thick pebbled spectacles, slightly blued, which concealed their expression as successfully as sunglasses.

It was when he stood that Barnes realised he had lost weight unusually quickly. Apart from the heaviness of his face he was wasted. His clothes were slack, the cuffs of his jacket hanging over the backs of his hands. He reminded one of a famine victim rigged out in a too-large suit by the Red Cross.

Although Barnes had neither the time nor the intention of becoming involved with strangers on his short week-end in Brussels, he found himself engaged in conversation with him on the following morning.

It was Barnes' habit to visit the Chez Ernest each morning for coffee and a glance at the English newspapers. And it amused him to spend half an hour watching the gay throng of people along the Adolf Max. The sight always filled him with pleasure—the women in their brightly-coloured clothes chatting with their men as though they hadn't a care in the world; and the young prostitutes were entertaining, eyeing the unescorted males with mischievous eyes. Oddly enough there was none of the sordidness that attached to their counterparts in London or New York. Here they seemed out for a jolly

party, and although the inevitable outcome was a financial transaction, they had a pretty knack of not making it too obvious.

The next morning, when Barnes went into the café, all the tables were occupied, so he raised his hat and seated himself beside the man.

Barnes knew that some people claim to have premonitions when in the presence of tragedy or mysticism, but in the presence of that little man he had none. As an individual he didn't interest Barnes in the least. It was merely the perpetual motion of those hands which drew one's eyes. And that morning they were on the move as never before. Several times Barnes turned his head away, but his attention was constantly drawn by those fingers as they danced uneasily on top of the table.

They started talking—about the merits of the coffee or the cognac, Barnes could not remember—yet even as the man talked he touched his cup, his glass, his spoon, then examined the cuticle of each nail as though in search of the symptoms of some frightful disease. It began to unnerve Barnes a little, perhaps because the man's actions were a pointer to an acute nervousness in himself. Barnes mentioned something about it. Immediately the man folded his hands in his lap, out of sight under the cloth, and his jaws knotted as he clenched his teeth.

"My hands are nothing, Monsieur. . . ."

Barnes told him his name, and added, "I assure you I had no intention of being personal."

Impatiently his companion shook his head. A waiter caught sight of the movement and came over to the table. The man ordered brandy and invited Barnes to join him. When the waiter moved off, he huddled himself over the table and stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets. It was an action which most people did frequently and unconcernedly; with him it was quick and deliberate, as though he were imprisoning them and warning them to stay hidden.

"I believe you mentioned that you were leaving Brussels in the morning?" he asked.

"First thing," Barnes said. "I have to be back in the Hague by evening."

The drinks were placed on the table and he jerked his head up in order to examine them. The action was unexpected. Barnes thought for a moment that he was going to jump from the table and leave him.

"Monsieur . . . perhaps you would be interested to hear something. Your awareness of my hands . . ."

Barnes felt embarrassed, as though he had been caught reading an open letter on somebody's desk.

He sensed the feeling. "No, no," the stranger said, "you have forced nothing from me by your remark about my hands. If I tell you, it is because I choose to do so. Look!"

He pulled his hands from his pockets and held them towards Barnes. The sight of them was a shock. They resembled the hands of a dead man. And they were fat; each finger was short and plump, strung to a podgy wrist like an inflated rubber glove tied to a stick. The skin was dead white, like paper, and the nails were white too.

"Not attractive hands," he said, "white and unhealthy to look at, eh? It is because I wash them so much, you see. Ten, fifteen, twenty times a day I wash them; I even use these new synthetic detergents they talk about so much, but still my hands will not come cleanly from the water."

He smiled, a smile of the lips, nothing more. Barnes was convinced that could he have seen the eyes they would have been quite unconscious of the relaxation of the owner's mouth. He thought he must be mad, and hoped he was harmless. Again he read Barnes' thoughts; it was uncanny.

"You think me mad? Many more of them would if they only knew." His voice had become so low that Barnes strained his ears to catch the words. "Listen, monsieur, would you think me an artist? An artist of considerable distinction?"

Barnes stiffened in his chair. Artist? Artist of considerable distinction? Wasn't that what he had longed for for himself, dreamed of? Now this man . . . an artist. Why should Barnes have run into him, of all people?

The little man fished in his pockets for cigarettes. The flame of the match trembled. He lit his cigarette, then put a finger in the brandy, lifted the table-cloth, rubbed his finger on the wood and applied the match. A tender blue flame sprang from the table-top, burned for a second, then went out. Barnes thought him an alcoholic, a helpless and pathetic cognac addict.

"If the little flame leaps from the table, they haven't watered the cognac," he explained. "It's expensive enough, eh? We don't wish to pay this fancy price for water. But listen, as I was telling you, art . . . artists . . . would you be an artistic gentleman yourself, Monsieur?"

"No," Barnes said, and it was true. Were his mediocre sketches art? Were his hands, which held the brushes, the hands of an artist?

"No? Well, as for me, before the war I painted hard. I painted anything, everything. A profile, a tree, a flower, the countryside, the happy face of a pregnant woman, the sad eyes of a diseased man, a leaking barge, telegraph poles overthrown by the wind, the yellow, soiled collar of melting snow, the bluey ice in the river. I even painted the whisper of the wind in the long grass. Everything the good God placed before my eyes I tried to interpret on canvas. It was a hobby, you understand? Rather, at first a hobby. At the time I was also a teacher of philosophy at a school here in Brussels, and I had little enough money to live on, let alone devote money to the study of art. But from a hobby it developed and grew until it was a part of my life. To create was my ambition; to form beauty with colour was an obsession. The smell of oil paint drove me frantic. The sight and touch of virgin canvas, ready for my brushes, gave me a thrill equal to the thrill many men

get from a second of ecstasy with a beautiful woman. My God, my God, I would have stolen paints and canvases at that time! had I found myself without the money for them."

His cigarette split down the side, and black tobacco fell over the cloth. He ignored the mess and lit another.

"I would have liked creation in music," he said, "but my parents never had the money with which to give me the joy of music. No, it had to be colour, and it was then that I discovered the tragedy." He raised his glass but banged it back on the table without tasting it. It was then that Barnes became aware of tension; the man was forming about himself an atmosphere of acute strain.

"The tragedy cost me my soul, Monsieur. I discovered that my colours would not live and breathe . . . you know what I mean? A painting can be a simple face, or an old church, or a flower caught in a beam of sunlight, and in some hands it will be dull, a factual recording. But in the hands of the truly great it may well be everything. In the hands of inspiration it can give out life as surely as we do. But it seemed that I had not that gift. I had not the time in which to cultivate it; my pupils at the school took my time, and with it they took my life. Soon I hated them and their piddling, awkward questions, and their stupid, ink-blotted examination papers. But I had to persist. Had I left my teaching I should have starved, and starvation does not improve true art, whatever the books may say."

He shifted uneasily in his chair and cracked the joints of one hand with the other. Barnes wanted him to stop, yet he also wished to hear him out. Why had fate picked *him* to hear this failure's story, a failure so like his own? Was it to help him, make him realise that there might be those worse off than himself? But he was well enough off—he had Jan, his life in the Hague, Jan above all things. . . . But after—when it was over—might he need this help then?

"Then came the war, Monsieur," the little man went on,

“and the Germans. Then one night, one of your fliers came also. I found him wandering outside the town and I hid him, and then I discovered what I had been looking for. . . .” Leaning forward he put a hand on Barnes’ arm. Its pallor, the grotesque appearance of those bloated fingers caused Barnes to draw away.

“You do well to draw back,” he said, “for this boy came and I took him in. So young he was, with the fairest hair and soft skin and the eyes of a martyr. The Germans were shooting some of them, you know, as reprisals for the great raids, and the anguish of the situation was in this boy’s eyes. I tell you, I knew this was the subject I had been waiting for, had tried to prepare myself for, all my life. He had the face of man’s idea of Christ. He was suffering for man’s greed and in his eyes and the lines of his mouth was the bewildered knowledge of it. I knew it was what I wanted, and the thought that at last I might achieve greatness in myself was exquisite, overpowering. I painted him and I worked as I had never been able to work before. Life entered my brushes and breathed surely on to the canvas. I gave up my teaching and during all hours of the day I hurried to finish my first great picture. I was hurrying, hurrying, in case anything should happen. In case. . . .”

Again he paused. Sweat stood out on his pasty cheeks, glistening as his spectacles glistened.

“. . . and something did happen. They found out that he was with me, those German pigs. I could have been executed, you must realise, for hiding him, but that did not matter. What counted was the work. Before everything else, *everything else*, that picture had to be completed. I bargained with them. For that canvas I sold them my soul. I made a contract to deliver the boy to them, together with any information I could get from him, if they would allow me to finish. They took me to some headquarters, they agreed, I finished my work.”

His hands trembled with such violence that he gripped the table-edge and hauled himself to his feet.

"Listen," he said, "will you meet me here tonight? At about ten? There is something I will show you . . . something you will never have the chance to see again."

He walked out without waiting for an answer. Small he looked, his clothes hanging pathetically from his meagre body, peering short-sightedly before him as he moved off. A tiny, lonely old man filled with fear. Barnes felt sorry for him and wondered where lay the truth. Was he a drunkard and a liar, or was he a man of great loneliness because he had betrayed not only the boy, but himself also? Barnes had met so many men who, under the influence of drink, poured out troubles both imaginary and real, who claimed to have committed the worst possible crimes, who wrapped themselves in an atmosphere of recrimination and self-pity. And some of them had even come to believe what they said, so that their stories carried a certain conviction, had become polished in the telling and deceived you if you were not on your guard. But this man . . . those hands . . .

Barnes returned to the Chez Ernest at ten. He couldn't help himself; it was as though he were destined to meet this man, to see the whole act through. The streets were brilliantly lit and the café was full. An orchestra was playing, but Barnes took a seat at one of the pavement tables. There was no sign of the little man, and he ordered himself a whisky and soda and a sandwich. It was the first time he had been to the café at night, and it was interesting to note how different was the crowd from that which frequented it in the morning. The people were far younger, of course, and they appeared to be well known, and certainly were spending a lot of money.

Barnes' companion arrived at about half-past ten, pushing timidly past a woman selling hard-boiled eggs from a basket. Leaving his seat Barnes went over to meet him. He asked him to have a drink, but the little man brusquely shook his head and jerked it in the direction of the tram-stop. Once aboard, Barnes looked out of the windows to see in which direction they

were going. Perhaps it was an instinctive precaution, for he didn't entirely trust the man's sanity, and he wanted to be prepared to get back in a hurry to a place where there were people other than themselves.

They went up the hill towards the Avenue Louise. They passed that and at the next stop Barnes's companion touched his arm and stepped out.

"This was the building they took me to," he said, and pointed to a block of flats on the opposite side of the street. "They had their Gestapo headquarters there. And they lived well, Monsieur, take my word for that. Wonderful food, and the best furniture and carpets looted from the shops. Yes, how well I remember it, whilst we, the Belgian people, we starved, and got sent to prison for smuggling a basket of vegetables or an egg or two from the countryside. And they had their women there, too . . . our women, the bitches. . . ."

They turned off the main thoroughfare, down a dark side-street named the Rue Rainard. The street lamps were far apart, so that most of the time they walked in shadow. Outside a large gloomy house he stopped and fumbled uncertainly for his keys. Then they went in, pausing long enough for him to put a match to the old-fashioned gas mantle in the hall. Then they groped their way up two flights of uncarpeted stairs, and Barnes wrinkled his nose at the smell of decay, mingled with the bitter odour of Caporal cigarettes and dust. The distemper was flaking off the damp walls; in places the plaster had fallen away, revealing the laths like the exposed ribs of a slaughtered animal.

On a landing on the top floor he stopped again and jingled his keys on their chain.

"I have these rooms. Just the two top ones. They serve my purpose."

The first was a small kitchen with a wash-basin against one wall. Beneath it a grey pile of soiled towels reached the bottom of the basin. The second room was directly opposite.

Barnes noted the door as the little man lit another gas mantle.

"A drink?" the other asked.

Without waiting for a reply he reached up to a shelf and took down a bottle and a couple of glasses. They sat at the kitchen table and drank a little of the brandy.

Barnes stared at him uncertainly, wondering why he, a complete stranger, should have been asked back to these rooms. It was obvious the man had few visitors. Was it because Barnes happened to be a foreigner and was leaving the country in the morning? Or was there more to it than that? Had this man sought him out because he had to read another mind?

"Well," Barnes said, "I don't quite see what you want me here for."

Whilst Barnes lit a cigarette his companion removed his spectacles. His eyes were so darkly rimmed that at first it was difficult to make out the pupils. He moved his head to the light, and Barnes noticed that the pupils were expanding and contracting in a curious manner. They swam in yellowish whites, shot here and there with blood, and when he looked over the table he peered awkwardly like an animal that is unaccustomed to strong light.

The room was very quiet. Sounds from the street barely reached them. The gas flames wavered in a draught from the door and their shadows executed a grotesque dance on the wall until he slammed the door and the flame settled down. His breathing was forced and he stood by the table with his arms pressed tightly against his sides.

"My painting," he said. "I told you about it this morning, eh, Monsieur? The fury with which I painted, the hard work I put in on my canvases? I shall never paint again. One fine picture is complete, and I can never show it." He groaned, and swayed from side to side. "No, nobody at all can see it, and it is my masterpiece. But they would know if I let them see it. I shall have to destroy it, because already it has

destroyed me. I can neither eat nor sleep nor live because peace has gone from me." His voice rose until it became shrill and hysterical. He wrung his hands together and stamped one of his little feet on the floor. "I'll rip it to pieces, by God, I *will* do it. I've said I would for years."

His voice dropped as suddenly as it had risen. He grabbed his glass and gulped down the brandy, coughed violently and pinched the bridge of his nose. "But I *can't*," he whispered. "Can one destroy the one thing in life that has made it worth while? But I'll show *you*! Yes, you can see it and then you can clear off. Yes, clear off back to your own country and forget all about it. Or remember it, just as you please. You will know anyway that you are the only one of your countrymen that has seen a masterpiece that has never been shown."

He turned and opened the second door. Slowly Barnes followed him. He had a great canvas on an easel in one corner draped with a cloth. The gas lamp from the kitchen shone directly on it. The rest of the room was dimly lit, but Barnes could make out the shape of a camp-bed and untidily piled blankets and a big trunk by the other wall. Barnes closed his eyes for a moment—he wanted to shut out everything visual for a few seconds and relax.

"Look," the man said huskily. The word reached Barnes as though from a great distance. He shook himself and opened his eyes.

He found himself staring at the head of Christ. His eyes were turned slightly to one side and upward, in the traditional pose. But in His face was bewilderment and sorrow and a great compassion. The gentleness of it touched Barnes' heart and he felt a dryness in his throat thinking of that boy, the model, and of this tired old monster who, with his genius and with the blood of another, had created it.

Again Barnes closed his eyes for a second, then opened them, hoping to see the head in a different perspective. But it was exactly the same. The hair was golden and soft, red with

blood from the thorns which pierced the skin. The eyes were sad and courageous, and the warm living lips seemed to be entreating God to forgive the painter his terrible sin, just as another Christ had begged forgiveness for His executioners.

Barnes was moved, terribly shaken, not by the old man, but by the plight which that boy must have found himself in. It was only after several seconds that he heard the noise from the man.

He was standing to one side of the picture, that living, glowing masterpiece, his body writhing. His mouth worked and his face had crumpled and collapsed as though he were about to cry. He put out a hand and touched the picture, then stared at his fingers and made a choking sound in his throat. Barnes stared at those fingers, and in the light from the wavering gas-lamp he could have sworn they came away red.

Against his will he stepped nearer the picture and raised an arm to touch it. Then the little man leaned over and knocked down his hand, his face so horribly contorted that Barnes thought he had gone mad.

He came closer to Barnes, his arm out, the fingers of his hand clenching and unclenching, and in a sudden fit of nervousness Barnes backed out of the room and crossed the kitchen to the outer door. As he hurried down the stairs he heard his companion shout something, but he didn't wait to hear what it was. Then the tap splashed above, and a second later Barnes was out of the house and hurrying along the Rue Rainard.

On the main road he found a taxi and went back to his hotel. His heart was beating faster than usual, and a thin line of sweat had started out on his upper lip and tasted salty on his tongue.

All the way back he thought of those soiled towels, and the sight of the man's fingers when he had pulled them away from the canvas. Perhaps he couldn't leave the picture alone, and

during the afternoon had added more paint to the scarlet blood which trickled down that sweet brow. And yet Barnes had not seen any brushes or paints in the room. Perhaps it had been, after all, a trick of the light. He didn't know.

When he reached his hotel he found himself scrubbing his hands under the hot tap in the washroom, and throwing the towel on top of a pile of others in a basket beneath the basin.

At ten p.m. a pale-faced youth with a mane of uncut black hair and bad teeth climbed on the band-platform and announced the cabaret. It consisted of three acts; a pianist, followed by a male vocalist, and finally the *grand finale*—a double contortionist act, the male partner well into middle-age with a sagging stomach and pectoral muscles like those of a woman. The girl was starved-looking and scrawny, and when she tied herself in knots every bone was outlined beneath the skin and gave one the horrible impression that she was advanced in death and already the skeleton was showing through.

The audience scarcely paid any attention to them. The sporadic clapping must have been a greater embarrassment than total indifference, and the performers backed hurriedly through the curtains without risking a second appearance.

When the waitress brought Barnes the cognac he had ordered he said, "They don't get much encouragement, do they?"

She tossed her head. "They get paid. That's all they care about."

"You think so?"

"Why not?"

"It's usual for troupers to have pride in their work."

"Pride," she repeated, and sounded surprised, "*pride*. A few guilders each week—enough to eat and have a few drinks and find a warm bed, that's all the war has left us."

It was true, that was about all they had left. Without money, or a little power or influence, they were derelicts. Barnes had seen evidence of it in his work. The fiasco of justice was all there, in those folios he read hour by hour in his office. He knew of the wealthy industrialists to whom valuable

contracts had been given by the Germans in the war and who had since secured equally valuable contracts from the Government. He knew too of the hundreds of labourers and artisans sentenced to years of imprisonment for driving a German truck, or building the roads in order to secure a little extra bread for their children.

He had evidence of Dutch building contractors paid vast sums by the Germans to construct concrete defences along the coasts of Noordwijk and Katwijk, and now paid equally large sums by the Government to remove them; of wealthy doctors who had passed their own compatriots as physically fit for slave labour now enjoying some of the best practices in the country. But what could *he* do? Merely run a red line across the documents of their sons and prevent them from entering England. What sort of punishment was that? They would continue to go to the night clubs, drive their sports cars to the coast, seduce their girl friends on their fathers' money. Why should they care about enlisting and going to England to prepare for another war?

With such evidence one must surely reconcile oneself to the fact that money was the ultimate power. But such reconciliation was defeat in the end. It was to accept corruption, acknowledge the laws of the jungle. Yet you had to have power to do that and get away with it, so where did the rat-run end?

Barnes began to feel sleepy. The air was stale with tobacco smoke and the fumes of cooking from behind the zinc counter. Perhaps he would sleep tonight, and so be ready to face de Groot and the trip to Amsterdam the day after tomorrow. The thought of Amsterdam reminded him of the letter. He took it from his pocket and slit the envelope. It was not from de Groot, as he had expected, but from van Dijk, his employer.

DEAR MISTER BARNES,

I have learned with pleasure from M. de Groot that we

shall have the pleasure of meeting you here in Amsterdam, on Thursday next. Perhaps you would do me the honour of lunching with me, when I can outline to you the proposition I have in mind, and which I think and trust will be of considerable interest to you.

Naturally, I know your name and excellent reputation in the diamond business, but even so you may be surprised at the rather informal way in which you have been approached. I now hasten to assure you that the reason was largely one of haste. I am aware of the fact that you are shortly returning to England, and was most desirous of outlining my intelligent business proposition before you sailed.

Once more I express pleasure at the prospect of the forthcoming meeting, and beg to remain,

Yours most sincerely,

A. VAN DIJK.

Barnes screwed up the letter and dropped it in the ash-tray. If nothing else it was a free trip to Amsterdam where he could at least pick up his month's pay from head office.

He signalled the girl and paid his bill.

"Aren't you staying for the eleven o'clock cabaret?" she asked.

"The same as the last one?"

"What do you think this place is—the Palace Theatre?"

"I suffer from my stomach," Barnes said, "that's enough for me."

It had stopped snowing outside. A gusty wind cracked round the Square, and overhead the stars glittered icily. Barnes was shivering when he reached his hotel and he asked for a jug of hot milk to be sent to his room. He had left the electric fire on and the air was so dry that you could feel it shrivel the taste buds on your tongue. He spread his pyjamas in front of the fire and inevitably clicked open the locks of his suit-case and took out a bottle of brandy. He wondered idly

where the chambermaid was. Having her supper with the other maids, giving them colourful details of what had happened here earlier on? Or would she keep to herself the fact that at the last moment he had not wanted her? He was sorry in a way that she wasn't here. Perhaps, with a great effort of will, he could summon up the face of Jan and so satisfy the girl, and himself too, for a few brief moments. But afterwards, what then? Revulsion and a deeper melancholy and the acid knowledge that at last he had sunk to prostituting memory.

As he took off his jacket and hung it over the chair the unopened letter from Margaret crackled in his pocket. It had been there for some time now, but he made no move to open it. He knew well enough what it would contain—lines so steeped with reproach and recrimination that they made the writing seem harsher somehow, as though her bitterness convulsed her hand and dug the nib's point in the paper. They both of them knew it was over—then why this constant attempt to rekindle a dead fire?

With Jan it had been the reverse—their fire had been fierce, hands other than their own had wielded the extinguisher. His own Colonel, for instance, and Jan's boorish Dutch friends. The Colonel had been fair enough, merely doing his duty as he saw it, obeying orders. Although it was ten years ago Barnes could still picture his rather flushed face on that winter's evening when he had been summoned by the adjutant to the Colonel's office.

"Sit down, Barnes, sit down," he had said in answer to Barnes's salute. "Have a dish of tea, eh? The orderly's just fetching it."

The Colonel's discomfort was obvious. He tossed a document in the in-tray, retrieved it, placed it on his blotter, then fumbled in his tunic-pocket for cigarettes. Such a performance was quite foreign to him. Usually he was brisk, precise, and spoke on military matters and daily routine

with the assurance of an experienced and efficient commander.

'The cat's out of the bag,' Barnes thought, as the orderly banged the cups of tea on the desk and withdrew. Well, it was to be expected. Why imagine the Hague to be any different from Bognor, or Lewes, or Epsom or the cat's-claw world of Mayfair? The same over-rouged ladies with lined necks and bright little diamonds and piercing malevolent eyes unsheathed the same lacquered claws over the milk-jug.

"Cigarette, Barnes? Well now, to be precise, I have a rather private matter to discuss with you . . . informally, of course, as a friend, if you see what I mean. . . ."

Of course Barnes saw what he meant, but with a cruel little smile he answered, "No, I don't follow you, sir."

The Colonel coughed uncomfortably. "I'm in rather a difficult position, my dear Barnes," he said. "Were we in civilian life you would be . . . er . . . a junior executive, if you will forgive the simile, and what you did in your spare time, outside the firm, as it were, would be no concern of mine. None at all. And no concern of the directors. In fact it would be nobody's business but your own . . ." He puffed at his cigarette and the ash fell and powdered his tunic untidily. Down the corridor the Sergeant-Major's voice could be heard yelling, "*Where's that son-of-a-bitch with the laundry, Corporal . . . thirty-six hours late . . . I'll have his tripe on a plate. . . .*"

"I really must tell that man to keep his voice down," the Colonel said. "He's new here, as you know . . . paratrooper . . . bit rough and ready. . . ."

Barnes decided to act in the curtain-raiser himself. "He's a splendid N.C.O., sir. I saw his file. D.S.M., and three mentions in dispatches. The men worship him and he scares them to death. A happy combination."

"Quite so, quite so. I haven't many complaints about any of my people. I haven't any *personal* complaints about you,

Barnes. We know each other well, you and I, and if I had any criticisms to make, I wouldn't hesitate to make them to your face."

"Know each other well?" Barnes thought. How well? Two or three months in the Hague, meeting at the same cocktail parties, the Mess balls, the Embassy suppers, the occasional C.O.'s conferences—how intimate did one become in this inconsequential pattern? Barnes's intimate friends were men with whom he had been in battle, if only for a month, a week or an hour. When you faced death on that scale you were stripped naked; pretence could find no hidden corner and a blemish showed up like a livid scar. When you shared fear with a man you touched the secret place, and knew him, just as when you truly loved a woman and accepted her and *gave* to her, without reservation, then you crossed the last barrier and knew her too. But without touching the secret place of fear with a man, without entering a woman's mind in that split second as you entered her body, you could never truly know. Not know without being conscious of knowing, which was the real knowledge. . . .

"As it is," the Colonel went on in his tone of discomfort, "as it is, Barnes, criticism has been levelled from other quarters. You know how it is in military units of this sort. People make . . . er . . . unwise comments . . . certain remarks reach certain ears. . . ."

Barnes said, "I still don't understand what it is you're driving at, sir."

"Well, then, to come to the point. Unlike civilian life, officers in the Service are on duty all the time. What they do in their spare time, how they conduct themselves, *matters*, Barnes. The uniform for one thing. They wear His Majesty's uniform and it's up to them to see that they don't bring discredit on it in any way, any way at all. This is particularly the case when they serve in countries other than their own. I'm sorry if this sounds rather . . . er . . . like a lecture, but

I'm trying to point out that men in our position have to be on guard at all times. As I say, particularly when we serve abroad. Here in Holland, for instance, we have to be doubly careful not to make the wrong impression on the people . . . the . . . er . . . civilians in particular. They watch us, you know. I'm inclined to think they even watch for our mistakes, and find a certain pleasure in them."

"The Dutch people have always appeared to me to be most friendly and co-operative, sir," Barnes said.

"Of course. Naturally. But one must bear in mind that they resent us a little. The gala feeling when we came in and liberated them has gone now. I imagine they resent us because we *did* liberate them, when they were unable to liberate themselves. They want us out now, Barnes, make no mistake about that. They feel quite capable of running their own affairs, and our help, our advice seems to them nothing more than prolonged interferences. Take your own duties, my dear fellow. Do you think they relish your prying into their conduct during the war, eh?"

"A lot of them have good reason not to."

"Perhaps so. I know it's necessary and you know it's necessary. But they don't . . . not now . . . not when the fighting's all over. After the liberation our uniforms, our arms, our tanks, our rations made us little tin gods, but they want us off our pedestals now, right enough, and that's why we have to be so damnably cautious and tactful."

Barnes said irritably, "We ran the swastika out of Holland, what have they got to complain about?"

"Yes, yes," answered the Colonel soothingly, "quite so, my dear fellow. But now they have become accustomed to peace. Kicking a German prisoner up the arse is no longer a novelty to them. They have forgotten that only a short time ago they would have had plenty to worry about from that same German." The Colonel snipped the edge off one of his polished finger-nails with his teeth, and added, "One simply

can't expect gratitude from a man who has grown to resent you, that's too much to ask."

It was true. It measured exactly his own beliefs. The bitchery of Time, as he had told Jan, the sophism of healing.

Barnes blew a smoke-ring and jabbed his sparking cigarette-end through its centre. "If any of my actions have caused you any concern . . ." he began.

"No, no, *no*," the Colonel answered hurriedly, "nothing you have done has caused me any concern personally, as I said before. The point is . . . well . . . the Brigadier has pointed out to me that your . . . er . . . friendship with a certain Dutch lady has been causing certain unfortunate comments. . . ."

Barnes was tired of the game. He decided to bring things out in the open. "Are you referring to my friendship with Mrs. van Daal?"

How strangely the name came to his lips. Mrs. van Daal! Jan he knew so well, Jan van Daal not so well. Mrs. van Daal might have been a stranger.

"Thank you," the Colonel said, "yes, frankly I am. Mrs. van Daal, as you say. Mark you, Barnes, I have no personal objection to my officers having attachments here in Holland, it's natural, God-damnit, and any number of these Dutch girls are most eligible. The trouble is, when one becomes attached or, rather, involved, with a married lady, the lady frequently has friends who make trouble. Either that, or the lady's husband has friends who do the same thing, particularly if the husband is away. Don't question me about their motives. We all know what the motives are—and their place is in the dust-bin. But I suppose they're entitled to stir up trouble if they feel a lady is being taken advantage of. . . ." He raised his hand quickly. "No, no, no, no, I'm not saying you have taken advantage of anybody. I said if they *feel*, rightly or wrongly, that a friend of theirs is being taken advantage of, in a wife's absence or a husband's absence, then one must expect fireworks."

"May we come to the point, sir?"

"Very well, Barnes, let us come to the point. Briefly, Mrs. van Daal's husband is a senior officer in the Dutch Army, and certain Dutch officers and Dutch civilian women have made complaints about your liaison. I don't want any details from you, nothing at all. This isn't an official investigation. It's a friendly chat. I am merely speaking to you, warning you, if you like, about the possible consequences were the matter brought to the Ambassador's notice."

"Is that likely?"

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders. "Anything is likely. A few bitchy words in his ear at an Embassy party. . . ."

"Gossip, nothing more," Barnes said. "Would he pay attention to poisonous jabs of that sort?"

"If there were enough . . . er . . . jabs, he might be forced to. And say there was some unofficial complaint to one of the Secretaries. At all costs the Brigadier wants to avoid this. That's why he has asked me to speak to you."

"An ultimatum?" Barnes asked.

The Colonel examined carefully the finger-nail he had earlier bitten. "Most certainly not, my dear fellow. Just advice."

"Advice?"

"Of course. That you don't see quite so much of her . . . mix with other women a little more . . . avoid these prolonged visits to the lady's residence. . . ."

Barnes said icily, "Who has been spreading this dirt? Not our people, I'll bet., Dutch Army officers, you said! Civilian Dutch women! They call themselves *officers*. And the *women*. . . ."

"Keep your hair on," the Colonel tried to be jocular, "steady the Buffs. I know it's unpleasant. But so long as you *know*, my dear fellow. Forewarned is forearmed, what, *what*?" Embarrassment laid him open; Sandhurst filled the gap. "Questioning a lady's virtue? *What!* They ought to be horse-

whipped, the bounders, but what can we do, Barnes, what can we *do*? Nothing, old boy, nothing at all, except be cautious. You understand, caution, give no grounds for criticism. . . .”

He stood up. He was through his ordeal now, and his cheeks lost their flush and resumed their habitual yellowish, India-tour pallor.

“Well, my dear fellow, that’s over and done with. I’ll inform the Brigadier that we have had a little talk. Now, the tea’s cold. How about a sherry?”

Barnes was no longer angry. If anything, he felt tired, as though he had completed some unaccustomed physical exercise. “Tell the Brigadier what you like, sir,” and he added, with an irony he could no longer conceal, “I’m sure he’ll be delighted that it all went off so easily.”

“I beg your pardon, my dear fellow.” The Colonel proffered a glass of sherry. “I don’t quite follow you.”

“It was nothing,” Barnes said wearily. “I was merely thinking aloud.”

“Well, cheers,” the Colonel said, “just exercise caution, my dear chap. Meet some of the British Embassy girls, delightful lot, just about right for you, young, keen to see the country, and you could take them down to Brussels without causing trouble.”

The India-tour tan reddened. He had put his foot in it without meaning to. What the *hell* had made him say that? He glanced at his companion uneasily, but Barnes had ignored the remark.

“Will that be all, sir?”

“Don’t be so damned formal, Barnes, we aren’t on parade. Yes, that is all, as a matter of fact, but have another snifter before you go?”

“If it’s all the same to you, sir, I’ll be on my way.”

“Don’t take this thing too much to heart, eh? It’s a matter of diplomacy, old boy. The Ambassador’s very keen on that sort of thing.”

Barnes saluted and left. Diplomacy, mediation, negotiation, obligation—all the Embassy stock tags rang in his ears with each step down the corridor. And was the Army so different, with its 'tradition' and 'example', its King's Regulations and one's pattern of life drawn neatly on Daily Routine Orders?

An officer poked his head round a door and called, "Going back to the Mess, David? There's two of us want a lift."

He shook his head and walked on. The officer said to an invisible companion in the office, "It's like asking questions in a morgue."

Through the orderly-room door Barnes saw a furious sergeant-major facing a row of Dutch civilians. He threw his forage cap on the floor and shouted, "What in Christ's name is the matter *now*?" and an orderly answered placatingly "They've been ordered to report here to put in new pipes in the wash-house, sir, but they haven't any passes."

"Passes . . . *passes*," the sergeant-major roared, "what passes . . . whose passes! We ain't at war now, or are we? *Passes*! What are they, bleedin' Gestapo? You, Richards, get them men workin' on the pipes, for Christ's sake. How long have we got to be without hot water? At the double, now . . . one, two . . . one two. . . ."

Barnes should have intervened. Security came within his department, but he hurried on. Red tape, passes for six plumbers to fix the hot water pipes, diplomacy, setting an example—what really did all this rigmarole matter to *him*? He was paid for it, of course, but then soldiers in the glass-house were paid to polish nails chromium bright and toss them back in the water-can for the next day's polishing.

Outside headquarters he dismissed his driver and took the Humber himself. Where did one go from here? Did he say to Jan, "In accordance with Standing Orders you are out-of-Bounds. Diplomatic reasons. Good-bye."

Savagely he stamped on the accelerator and headed out of the Hague towards the aerodrome at Ypenberg. The drive

might calm him a little, and a number of the Dutch Air Force officers were friends of his. But he did not get far. Only a mile or two out, he turned the big car and drove back to the hotel in which he was billeted.

Things would have to be sorted out now, not left to take their course, as he had wanted them to do. Certainly he could not afford to ignore the Colonel's warning indefinitely. Like the Law, the arms of the Army were long, their pincers capable of giving the fatal nip. It was another system, all powerful, like monopolies and trade unions and high finance.

A cloud burst overhead and the rain masked his headlights and rattled like toy spandaus on the roof. He drove into the military car park and ran for the hotel entrance.

He went straight to his room on the first floor, flung open the door, and paused for a second, accustoming his eyes to the brightness. The wall-lights were on—rosy, feminine pink shades, and in their soft glow he saw Jan stretched on the bed, her hands laced behind her head. She smiled and gave a little 'aah' of pleasure.

Barnes glanced at his watch. Seven already. Usually he was back by six.

"You may well look at your watch! I've been waiting for you all afternoon, my darling, all the long, long afternoon."

"Not here?" he asked involuntarily. Usually he wouldn't have cared, but now, in the light of mediation, example, and all the rest of it, he was forced to. The system demanded it.

She wrinkled her nose. "Not here, so you don't have to be concerned about your reputation. But I had a bath, darling, in your lovely white tub. We haven't one in the Round House, as you know, and even we Dutch like to keep ourselves clean."

Usually such a comment would have goaded him to some ironical reply, but tonight he was weary, spent-out. His eyes ached from the strain of driving in the downpour and after the interview with the Colonel he had a lot to brood over.

He grunted and laid his soaking great-coat and cap on a chair.

Jan watched him, saw the gleam of rain on his neatly brushed black hair. She loved him especially in his uniform, he looked younger, boyish, and the Sam Browne gave his waist slenderness which pleased her. But he was pre-occupied, she knew that. He gave her a little absent smile and took a bottle of champagne and two glasses from the wardrobe. The rain splashed noisily down the windows and the whish-whish of tyres could be heard in the street. Over it all came that soft vibration of hotel life, like the muted engines on board a liner.

"So you've been waiting all afternoon?" he repeated, and added as a kind of aside, "Well, I hope you'll think it worth while."

"Why not worth while? It usually is, isn't it?"

"Of course, darling," he answered, without conviction, and yawned. "I'm tired out tonight, really dead-beat."

The wine gathered in a cloud of gloom which pressed down inside his head. Jan sat up on the bed and laid a hand on his hair, stroking it lightly over his temples. "Poor old David . . . the rigours of Occupation. Never mind, have a few more glasses of champagne, they generally put you right."

"I suppose so."

He unbuckled his belt, took off his tunic and loosened his tie. Jan snuggled up against him and placed her hand on his chest beneath his open shirt. She put her mouth on his, gently, undemanding, and her finger-tips moved lightly down and caressed his stomach. She soon sensed his anxiety and was wise enough not to question him. "I'll run you a bath, and you can sit and talk to me while you laze in the hot water. There, darling, aren't I good to you? And good for you?"

"Good to me, certainly," he said, "but good for me . . . that's another matter."

The water taps moaned as they always did when turned on at full pressure. "What did you say?" she called from behind the curtains.

"Never mind," he mumbled, "it was unimportant."

"What was unimportant?" she questioned, beside him once more.

"I questioned whether or not you were good for me."

"But I must be, darling. You don't want to go home any more, do you? Remember, a week or two ago you couldn't wait to get back to England on leave."

"I agree, but I was glad to be back here. England doesn't seem to hold much for me any more. It's ironical, isn't it? You fight your guts out for six years for your own country, and when it's all over you find you don't want what you've fought for. Where's the sense in that?"

Jan lay back on the bed and watched him remove his shirt and socks. Clothed only in his under-pants he went to the wardrobe and searched for fresh towels. He had good shoulders, held stiffly as they had taught him on the parade ground. As he reached up for the towels Jan saw the skin ripple over his shoulder-blades, over the hard muscles. When he turned, she glanced at his chest, at the powdering of black hair between his breasts, at his man's nipples, little more than marks on the flesh, but the marks of masculinity, of man.

Her love of him quickened, a forerunner of the desire which this man could arouse, a desire so overwhelming that she felt she could do anything for him, anything at all, if the doing of it would only make her surrender all the more complete. *Surrender?* No, she thought, not entirely surrender, rather her giving, becoming a part of him, a living part locked in his mind and body, in the blood and breath . . . yes, that was it, locking in with him, desperately, and he within too, never outside so that the shadow of loneliness could flit over them as sometimes it had threatened to do. . . .

Barnes wrapped his towel around his waist and drained his wine glass. Jan drank too, her fingers unsteady as usual.

"I was talking to the Colonel this evening."

"Oh, the famous Colonel, h'm?" Barnes heard in her voice

her contempt for the man, although she had never met him. Barnes frequently talked about him, of course, mimicking his rather prim formality and his devotion to Army tradition. God knows what picture Jan had formed about the man. Barnes could be a cruel mimic. Probably she saw a pompous little military bureaucrat, with pince-nez glasses and a thin, selfish mouth. Naturally, it was far from the truth. The Colonel was harmless enough—a product of the system which condemned initiative, and so he no longer possessed the initiative to harm anyone.

Barnes went to the bathroom, removed his towel and stepped into the hot water. He was never embarrassed with Jan, nor she with him. They recognised their bodies as sensitive instruments for unbelievable pleasure, to be loved without shame, almost to be revered. Yet they did not take their bodies for granted—always, it seemed, they discovered fresh attractions, one in the other.

Jan came in with re-filled glasses and sat on the stool by the bath.

"How is that for service, darling? How many girls in England would bring you champagne in the bath?"

"Yes," he sighed, "I'm lucky. In England they'll be mooching around in fogs or drizzle, and thousands and thousands of tired little men and women will be scurrying from their offices, trying to read dull newspapers in damp buses or trains or undergrounds."

"While your girl-friend here in Holland shamelessly chats with you without your clothes and helps you guzzle wine."

Her impish, shining eyes smiled at him. She wore a light dress, attractively flared at the skirt, and the nylon gleamed on her crossed knees. Barnes closed his eyes for a moment. The heat from the water spread through him and seemed to dissolve the pressure of anxiety he had felt since leaving the Colonel.

"Another thing," Barnes said, and sat up to soap his chest;

"half those dreary souls in their buses and undergrounds don't want to go home at all."

"Some do, surely."

"Some do, *some* do," Barnes repeated irritably. "How many? What can most of them find at home to compensate for days of boredom under a snuff-covered chief-clerk or a snotty-nosed under-manager promoted over them while they went out to fight the war?"

Jan manoeuvred him back to his original point. "They have their homes, their marriages. Just because *we* haven't doesn't mean it isn't desirable."

The soap slipped from Barnes's hand. He searched for it under his knees and said, "In most cases they married through loneliness, or in a spirit of adventure, to do *something* different from the usual pattern, to escape from home, or because their friends got married. Then, lo and behold, they wake up one fine morning and find they don't want their dear little partner at all. Very nice. And all that's left is the prospect of going home each night to make some dreary show of interest, discuss things which bore them to insanity; he talking about his work, because he doesn't in the least wish to hear the interminable account of what Mrs. Jones or Mrs. Smith has said or done, or how the dog pee'd on the carpet or went for the milkman, and what petty sins the children have committed at school; and the wife pressing all these points on him because she doesn't want in any way to be told about his work, or his thoughts, or how he feels."

His chest and shoulders shone with the water. Jan leaned over and kissed briefly the dark, moist hair between his breasts.

"Darling, how on earth did you ever become as bitter as this? How?"

"I remember when I was on a long leave after the war, I used to sit in the underground, or on the buses, and watch them. It was an exercise, really, preparing for what was to

happen to me one day. Most of them were men who had been in the war, who had had all the ultimate excitements, who had had command, perhaps, responsibility, and you watched them in the Tube, hunched over a newspaper, depressed, bewildered by some sort of hopelessness that had them by the guts. I used to get talking to some of them in the pubs. They looked at my uniform with a kind of longing, asked how it was in the 'old mob'. Then they sucked their beer down with an apology about having to get home to the wife. It was a real hopelessness, Jan, the kind that stretched away in front of them for the rest of their lives."

"But we humans can adjust ourselves to anything, h'm?"

"Perhaps."

"But you, *you* were never like that?"

"Oh yes, I was," Barnes said grimly. "I had my share of it. Three months later I was de-mobbed. I got some sort of job in Hatton Garden, with some diamond people, and I used to go to the office every morning at nine and come home every evening at six-thirty, just like those others, those death-masks you see all the time. It was hellish, that dreadful futility of going back to a woman I didn't want had no interest in. And the dreadful part was that there seemed nothing else in view."

"With Margaret?"

"Yes, with Margaret . . . long, dull talks, arguments that made you feel you perched on the edge of a volcano, arguments that could come to a serious head but which you knew in your heart never would, which made them all the more futile. You knew, deep down, that you were both too scared of the outcome, too defeated by life, to let them get out of hand. If they had, one might have achieved something. But at the crucial point you felt too *beaten*."

"You never feel too beaten with *me*," Jan said. "Our arguments come to a head with us, all right. You remember what happened that night I locked you out of the house? Wasn't that 'coming to a head'?"

He smiled. One night, after a row, she had locked him out of the Round House. He had driven back to the Hague and had borrowed a Service Humber four-by-two. Then he had driven back to the Round House and had smashed its steel bumpers through the front door. They had made it up in the night, but a new door had cost him four hundred guilders.

Taking her hand he held it against his cheek. "With us it's different. We have enough within us to let things come to a head. We aren't frightened."

"Not of each other," she said, "but we are frightened *for* each other, of the future."

"Being frightened *for* each other makes it all the more precious. As for the future. . . ."

"Yes, as for the future?"

He had been going to say, as he always said, "Let it take care of itself," but the habitual words stuck in his throat. It was being taken care of for them. All kinds of undesirable sources were at work on their behalf—the Brigadier, the Colonel, Dutch officers and Dutch civilians. . . .

"I was just thinking," Jan said, "I don't really think I have ever felt quite the way you feel. I've been terrified, during the Occupation, horribly frightened about what the Germans would think of to do next, and I've been just as terribly bored, with Rudolf, and even at home, before Rudolf ever appeared on the scene. . . ."

"Exactly," Barnes interrupted, "bored before Rudolf appeared on the scene. Bored with home-life, with your friends. Marriage as an escape. And what escape was it for *you*?"

"Well, I suppose I have been a little bored all my life. Until I met you, h'm?"

Barnes raised his knees in the bath and rubbed them with soap.

"Boredom is nothing," he said, "it's a disease we all have to suffer. No, it isn't boredom that frightenes me, it's the

acceptance of that life, the cowardly surrender to year upon year of a slavery to convention, because we haven't the guts to change things, or even to try to change them. It's stagnation to go on like that, a moral defeat, and it's killing, a slow death. That's what gives me the horrors. That's what drove me back to the Army . . . to get away . . . run from Margaret and all the years of moral defeats which she represented."

"It was the right thing to do, David. Suppose we had *missed this!*"

Was it so right? Barnes asked himself. Could one ever come to terms with a situation of this sort? Dismiss the thoughts of the lives it might affect? He supposed so. As Jan had said, one could get used to anything, then one could come to terms with anything, provided you blinded yourself, and there were God knows how many ways of accomplishing that.

He jumped from the bath and Jan wrapped the towel around him. They went back in the bedroom and he dried himself briskly, feeling better than he had done all day, beginning to forget the talk he had had with the Colonel, living only for *now* as he had become accustomed to living. The champagne was having its effect too; the feeling of depression had vanished; the fogs and drizzles in England could take care of themselves.

Hitching the towel about his waist he flexed his arms. "I feel wonderful now, darling. Your gloomy conversation has done me a power of good."

"My gloomy conversation." She laughed. "You and your buses and undergrounds. Do you know, I've never seen a London underground, never in my life."

"Obviously, as you've never been to London."

"True, but will we go one day?"

"Of course we will. To the Zoo and the Tower of London and Westminster Abbey and Trooping the Colour . . . anything you want."

"Ah," she said, "lovely, lovely. But in the springtime, I

don't want to see your drizzles. And I don't want to see the undergrounds, even in the spring."

"No, we'll keep above ground, darling. I'll sport you to lunch at the Savoy and dinner at one of those expensive restaurants in Soho, and I'll even take you to the ballet, although I hate it."

Neither of them believed they would ever see these sights or do these things. In fact, they knew they never would, but the show must go on.

"And the Serpentine, darling—you'll take me on one of those funny little boats on the Serpentine?"

He sat beside her on the bed, put his hands on her shoulders and turned her face to his. Her dark eyes were bright, unnaturally bright with the tears she would never let him see her shed. "Yes, on one of those funny little boats on the Serpentine. But tonight, sweetheart, where shall we go tonight?"

Her hands touched his sides, pressed his ribs. "Anywhere," she said, "here, the Round House, anywhere at all."

She released herself from him for a moment, stood up and turned her back to him. Her dress fell to the floor, and her strong, brown thighs moved with suppleness as she bent to remove her shoes. Then she came back beside him and pressed his head to her breasts, "Oh, I want you so. Must it end, darling, *must* it?"

And in that second before he was within her, a living part of her, and she a living part of him, breathing with him, their blood surging as though within the one body, in that dying second he pictured the Colonel biting a sliver of that neat finger-nail.

Barnes rang and rang the bell before anybody came to his room. The sheets and blankets had slipped half off the bed in his contortions, and his pyjama jacket was soaked in sweat. His face was soaked too, and he wiped his cheeks and throat with his sleeve. Quite suddenly, only a matter of twenty minutes ago, the pain had attacked him as never before. It had seemed as if his whole stomach was squeezed into a ball, then torn apart and twisted between fingers of steel. Once or twice he had shouted aloud in agony, but the wireless down the corridor had prevented anybody from hearing him. The pain was frightening. In the previous months it had worried him, but he had grown to accept it as the price he had to pay for his indulgences. Now he was terrified that he was at last breaking up.

In the past, when he had predicted this very situation, he had not cared very much. Now, he realised that not caring in anticipation was vastly different from not caring when in the presence of the event.

He sweated with pain, and with fear also; fear of being left alone to grapple with this fresh nightmare, alone to see the first coils of the greater darkness swirl about him as mist swirled in the early dawn about the black boles in the pine forest.

The agonising knife-thrust diminished slightly, but still he twisted and knotted the sheets in his hands as his bowels were twisted by those relentless fingers. He closed his eyes and the bed, the walls and the curtained windows were blacked out, but the devils on the bed-rail remained, grinning sardonic grins and twisting their eyes upwards in obscene mockery.

"So now he cares," they seemed to shriek. "Now he wants friends when all his life he's despised them, now he wants courage when he even despised that."

"It's not true," he tried to shout back, "not true, not true," and his heaving lungs attempted to pump the words from between his trembling lips, but all that emerged was a hoarse, erratic moaning. "It isn't true," he whispered violently, "I've always admired courage, admired men who could stand on their own feet and battle with life . . ."

"Stand on their feet and battle with life, stand on their feet and battle with life, stand on their feet. . . ."

Barnes clenched his fists over his ears to drown that mocking wail and opened his eyes to rid his vision of those ghastly faces, the writhing hideous mouths with blackened teeth and trickles of saliva on the malformed cheeks.

The familiar walls rose up about him, the triple bars of the electric fire glowed, his clothes hung on the chair . . . and the faces on the bed-rail vanished. 'God Almighty,' he thought, 'have I got D.T.s too? On top of all this am I in delirium?' To a certain extent he knew he was. He had had these black visions before, had been haunted through long nights by rows of hellish faces and hoarse whisperings which meant nothing, even to his alcoholic mind.

His brandy-bottle was still there. He grasped it by its neck and poured the spirit down, although it was madness to do so. But he had to do something, had to preserve his reason through the coming night, and at all costs had to numb those wavering pains which had for the present lessened, but which could come back in force at any time.

The bedroom door opened, and for a moment he forgot that he had been ringing the bell.

The waiter stood at the door and gazed with startled eyes at the disorderly bed and Barnes's wet, quivering face.

"Meinheer . . . Meinheer, are you ill?"

Barnes ground out, "Ask the manager to get me a doctor

. . . nothing serious, tell him . . . I need certain pills. . . .”

“But the manager is out for the evening.”

“Then ask the night porter to telephone a doctor.”

“As you will, Meinheer. Is there anything else I can do . . . a hot-water bottle, perhaps?”

“A hot-water bottle!” Barnes again wiped his sweating cheeks. Water had gathered on his eyebrows and now spilled from the corners of his eyes as though he were weeping. “Hot-water bottle! God Almighty, I’m burning to death. Go on, ring for a doctor,” and he added, with a twisted smile of the lips, “And stick it on my bill.”

“Immediately, immediately.” The door banged closed and from the bowels of the hotel the curious electric throbbing could just be heard, a muted sound of life, and Barnes, as he gulped more brandy, muttered venomously, to all his unknown enemies, to all the invisible night devils who lurked in the dark shadows, “Well, I’m not dead *yet*.”

As suddenly as they had made their onslaught, the pains in his stomach ceased. Barnes acknowledged the fact with a drunken wink at the brandy bottle. He almost regretted that in a moment of agony and weakness he had asked for the doctor. It was always the same—when the pain came he wanted help, wanted to divulge certain things (the nature of which he was uncertain), as though divulgence would ease his mind as the physician’s drugs eased the pain thrusts, deep and merciless as a Mau-Mau’s knife.

Once, when on a military tour of Holland, he had gone into a small Catholic church at sunset and had watched the queue of parishioners waiting to enter the confessional box. As they waited, kneeling uncomfortably on the hard benches, turning now and then to the gruff mutterings which emerged indistinctly from the coffin-shaped box, their faces seemed uneasy, conscious of sins committed, of the danger of God’s wrath. What sins? he had thought. Stealing a pail of milk, selling an under-weight loaf, coveting a neighbour’s wife,

thinking lecherously of a neighbour's daughter, speaking ill of a friend? And he had watched with a feeling of awe as the people shuffled, blinking, from the darkness of the confessional. Their faces seemed transformed, freed of guilt, their whole beings joyous in the humble belief of the miracle of God's forgiveness granted them by the garlic-reeking breath of the old priest in the darkness.

Barnes had often, in his dark moods, thought of that evening in the church, with the late sun's rays touching as though with a brush the squares and oblongs of coloured glass in the windows, the odour of wax and dust and stale incense, the mustiness of the ancient, tattered prayer-books and, above all, the look of *release* in the eyes of the forgiven.

Was it as simple as that? Was true faith the antidote to life's bite? Could one sin and confess and be washed clean? But he washed clean to *oneself*, not to some all-powerful mythical being who, if he existed, was more than likely unaware of one's sin anyway. To be free, he knew you had to forgive yourself, and he doubted if a moment's muttering in the rancid, gafflicky darkness could accomplish that.

Yet with the peasants on that quiet summer's evening it had seemed effective. It was only after deeper reflection that Barnes realised that they received the same relief as the intellectual from his psycho-analyst; both purged themselves as the body cleanses itself after cathartic medicine.

Yet he had never been able to purge himself to anyone—not to his father, to Margaret, to Jan nor to God. Always he had been reticent about his true feelings, even tongue-tied and incoherent at the important moments. To Margaret, whom he liked but did not love, he had spoken without difficulty or shame the words of love. At Jan, whom he loved almost beyond endurance, whom he longed to reassure (if reassurance was ever necessary) with words of love, he had shot vicious barbs and, fluttering inwardly with fear, had watched, with pleasure and pain, each barb go home.

Yet what mortal sins had he ever committed? Murder? He had murdered nobody but himself. Robbery? He had robbed nothing but the potentials of his own life and God knew that had been no robbery for gain. Rape? Yes, he had raped Margaret with false sentiment, with the suppression of truth (but he had atoned for that by flinging back to her the opportunity to lead her own complacent life). Incest? If incest was f—— yourself he had done that, and surely was atoning for it now?

His short life with Jan he could never consider a sin. He had robbed nobody of anything, except perhaps himself. . . . and Jan. But she had given, with her body, her soul and her blood, there had been no question of theft. Yet he wanted to believe, desperately, that he *had* robbed her, that wherever she was now she felt, and would always feel, that he had been the robber, that he had, in their short months together, snatched from within her, irretrievably, her chance of happiness again.

But sin in their union? Impossible. Where could you find sin in what was *right*! And surely it *had* been right. He recalled now, quite suddenly, the night after the storm at Noordwijk when they had gone again to the beach together. A high wind had been blowing all day, gusting and booming between the houses, driving the rain and the storm far over the land.

They had been forced to lean into it as they walked, their arms linked, their bodies close, united against the elements. Jan's dark hair had blown over her face, and in the moon-glow he had seen her white teeth as she had smiled, for she had smiled—the forces of nature appealed to her, seemed to dominate her so that she became unpredictable too, almost unknown in the strangeness of her mood.

They had reached the dunes, the tops of which had been snatched by the gale and were whisking past them. They had stood upon one of the highest ridges, gazing at the water, great, dark turbulent masses forever racing and thundering towards them. And above, the moon had climbed glaringly

into the black heavens, a full moon, like some monstrous eye, unwinking, which had seemed to search into their very beings. They had felt naked beneath it, and a form of moon-madness had sprung to life within them, and made them turn to each other and cling together desperately as though the thundering white-horses which roared in, and that glaring, evil eye above them had in some way united their destiny, had cut them off, on land and in the black sky, from all that they had known, had destined them to live for each other and by each other for all time.

Had it been *right*? To them, yes, and he supposed that that was all-important. Certainly he had no regrets. Only fears sometimes, when the pain came in the night, and the mouthing devils on his chest accused him of moral sins which he would not admit.

This time Barnes poured brandy into the glass and sipped delicately. The earlier draughts from the bottle had calmed him, the desperate need was gone—now he drank for pleasure—and to be in a position to mock the doctor when he did come.

He even succeeded in lighting and inhaling a cigarette without a spasm of coughing, which proved beyond doubt that already he was a little drunk.

All well and good, and the day after tomorrow he would go with de Groot to Amsterdam. Then England, and a visit to Guy's Hospital to see if they could patch him up a little. He had something to live for, and winked again at the bottle. Everybody had something to live for—reward for services rendered, a mother, a greenhouse in the garden, children, drink, a football match or a chambermaid in the brief minutes of a housekeeper's supper.

But as for sins. . . . He puffed at his cigarette and poured another drink. The boot was on the other foot—who had sinned against *him*!

Forgive thine enemies. Well, he forgave everyone. His mother her years of illness, his father his drink, Margaret her

intolerable bourgeois existence . . . and Jan her cowardice in leaving him. Finally, with a cigarette in one hand, his brandy-glass in the other, with the greatest possible magnanimity, he forgave himself for permitting Jan to leave him.

Finally he squeezed his eyes together and studied the pattern on the wallpaper. The lines and squares made no sense. He admitted to himself that when he was drinking, even long after a bout, his eyesight was impaired, but behind this pattern on the walls he was convinced there was no thought, no sense. Had the artist been mad? Probably, like the scarecrow in Brussels with the Blood of the Lamb fresh each day on his hands. The war had found its own curious little way to damn *him!* And Jan too. Hadn't it shown her her Ruudolf, with the long u, stripped of his uniform, stripped of his resistance, stripped of courage, yanking out teeth for a jar of cream or a couple of eggs?

And Barnes himself had not come out unscathed. The war had stuck his head under water, as it were, had submerged him. And he had never really come up. And ever since, life had been green, shadowy depths, whose events glided by like tropical fish—DO NOT TOUCH. DELICATE—and so he had not touched them but had let them drift by.

Now, of course, and particularly at this moment, he had no desire to surface. Let the bloody fish float by, he wouldn't touch them and so kill their delicate existence. By avoiding them he reprieved them, and by his power to reprieve he was, in a way, God himself.

'The trouble is,' he thought, 'I am only God on alcohol on an empty, ulcerated stomach. Were I God in sobriety I might have caught those fish without killing them. I might have come out of the water and held them captive. I might even have made a system out of them. But not now. I'm too deep. Those fish in the hundreds of millions of tons of water over me are safe. I can't reach them now, ever. The weight is too heavy, the shadows too shadowy, the men who go under water

only now and then in life can catch them and make the systems.'

Barnes wondered if he, like the artist who had created the wallpaper design and who, in Barnes's mind, was established as a madman, was a madman also. Who was it had said, 'When you put drink in your mouth you put in a thief to steal your mind away'? Perhaps so, but he could design a better wallpaper than that! Look at the pattern of his life! *His* design! Stick that on a wall and you would have something to shout about. And weave into it the patterns of Margaret, of the Colonel, of the slaughter of Arnhem, of the chambermaid, of de Groot, then fix its greasy surface with creeping paralysis and light it with Jan's bright glow and you would give the critics something to get their teeth into.

'Perhaps,' he thought, 'when I've been to Guy's and been patched up a bit I will paint this picture. And perhaps I will hang the canvas once and for all on the walls of the Aquarium and, in the shadowy, green submerged light it will, like the scarecrow's picture in the Brussels garret, bleed for man's inhumanity against himself. And men will look at it with the uneasy eyes of those before the confession and know that the artist lived in the small, dead field of God's blind eye.'

Down the corridor a nasal, electric voice announced the cure for body odour, and then a band struck up the chords of 'Jealousy'.

Barnes waved his glass in time with the music:

'My crime was my blind jealousy . . .

The music pressed against the wall, then fell through as the volume was increased. The Dutch voice in the next room which had complained of his coughing shouted, "Why isn't there a rule in this place to forbid radios at night? Twenty guilders a day! I've a mind to write to the owners about it."

"Tell the manager," a female voice answered placatingly.

“Manager, manager, that perfumed *Dummkopf*. . . .”

Barnes laughed gently to himself. He didn't object to the music, neither did he care about the ruffled feathers of his neighbour, nor the manager, nor the owners. He wasn't even concerned about Margaret's unperfumed scrawl of accusation in his pocket, or the crumpled letter from head office, or his hotel bill. “Furthermore,” he added aloud, as if to demonstrate once and for all his unconquerable disregard for everything, “I don't give a f—— for de Groot, his pox-ridden employer in Amsterdam, the housekeeper of this hotel or her whore of a chambermaid.”

Having convinced himself on this matter he tried to climb from the bed. His knees gave way and he landed on his buttocks on the floor. He laughed aloud, hauled himself unsteadily up by the bed-rail, hugged the wall as far as the wash-basin and relieved himself, taking care to turn on the taps so that his next-door neighbour would have no cause for further complaint. As he staggered back to the bed he caught the odour of his own breath, bitter and rancid as the smell of old wine that had been kept too long and had turned to vinegar. His urine had smelt the same. His blood must be saturated with alcohol. How long, he wondered, before alcoholic poisoning set in? Alcoholic poisoning! He was more afraid of that than of the ulcer. Numbness of the fingers, the hands, the feet, you could tolerate that . . . alcoholic arthritis . . . that wasn't so bad . . . but poisoning!

He made an effort to straighten the bedclothes, then fumbled with the clasps of his suit-case on its stand at the foot of the bed, pulled aside the spare suit of pyjamas, the shirts and collars (all soiled, which he had forgotten to send to the laundry) and saw with relief and satisfaction that two bottles of brandy still remained. The fact that there were two confused him. He had thought only one. Three originally—de Groot's little gift of two, one on his bill from the waiter. And he had drunk only one? Then he remembered that he had been down

in the bar, over the Square at the old Officers' Club. That accounted for his unsteadiness, and the empty bottle on the bedside table.

He hauled himself into bed and stuck his feet under the sheets as he caught the sound of footsteps in the corridor. A gentle tap sounded. He heard a voice say, "This room, Doctor," and the door opened.

The man nodded curt thanks to his unseen guide, closed the door and approached Barnes. Within his immediate vision was the unmade bed, Barnes's set, rather foolish grin, and the empty brandy bottle.

He gave no indication that he had observed anything, but said courteously, "Good evening. The head porter telephoned that you wished to see a doctor."

"Yes," Barnes said uncertainly, "yes, I did, but not now . . . the pain's gone. Nothing to see you about now. . . ."

"I see." The doctor dumped his bag on the floor, removed his hat and overcoat and laid them carefully on top of Barnes's clothes on the chair. He was a youngish man in his early forties, well-built, with receding hair over the broad forehead and steady eyes behind the glasses. When he pulled a chair to the bed Barnes saw that his wrists were slender, but the hands and fingers large, strong.

"It won't do any harm for me to have a little chat with you, in any event," the doctor said in his precise Dutch. "If you had some pain, perhaps we can discover its cause. . . ." he flicked his fingers confidently, ". . . and cure it."

"It's nothing," Barnes said, and felt as insincere as the hero on the movies who looked at his companion's shattered chest, then at his own shattered legs and said in his hoarse, hero's voice, "*It's nothing, Doc, nothing . . . look after my buddy . . .*"

"Have a cigarette? Good. Now then, the waiter mentioned that you appeared to be in considerable pain when you rang for him. Perhaps, as you say, it has passed off, but it's best in the long run not to ignore these things."

"Indigestion," Barnes said.

"That's easily cured," the doctor said, and smiled a warm smile with an eye on the brandy-bottle. "Irregular meals and perhaps a little too much to drink from time to time."

"Exactly," Barnes answered, and at that moment was troubled with wind. He belched politely behind his hand, as proof of his indisposition.

"Perhaps, now I'm here, you wouldn't object if I gave you a quick run over? You look tired. Not sleeping too well, perhaps?"

He leaned over and caught the odour of Barnes's breath. Mixed with the alcohol he could detect a ranker smell, the odour of an ailing stomach. The pulse was abnormally fast, probably stimulated by more brandy than the one empty bottle had contained. All the signs of the chronic inebriate were stamped on Barnes—the shaky hands, the tremble at the back of the neck, his tenseness (in spite of the drinks he had had before the doctor's arrival), the blood-flecked eyes and the sweat-soaked pyjamas and sheets. The yellowish tinge to his eyes and cheeks made the doctor ask, "Have you ever had jaundice, Mister. . . ."

"Barnes."

"Mister Barnes?"

"Never."

"So," the doctor said, and smiled again, "that's one complaint out of the way then." He went to the wash-basin and rinsed his hands. Then he opened his bag and laid various instruments on the bedside table.

"Now if you would just lie back . . . relax . . . splendid, splendid. . . ."

The strong, cold fingers touched his flesh, pressed and dug into it and in a moment or two the instruments glittered in the bed-head light as the doctor deftly applied them, one after the other. He said nothing—no re-assuring bedside chatter—and as his fingers poked and pried his brown eyes

stared into his patient's face, unwavering, until to Barnes they resembled the penetrating rays of a following car, never approaching, never falling back, but pursuing him relentlessly, however fast or slow he chose to go.

The examination lasted twenty minutes or so, but Barnes was not very worried. What could this man tell from eight fingers, two thumbs, a stethoscope and the other chromium bits and pieces he had stuck in the ears and throat, and the little light he had flashed in his eye? Very little, he imagined. His medical history was tucked safely away in the filing-cabinets of Guy's; apart from that, you required more than an X-ray machine and a rod with a light on to read into the *inner eye*.

The doctor washed his hands again, rubbed his instruments with a cloth and stuck them back in the bag.

"I imagine it's no secret to you to learn you probably have one or more ulcers?"

Barnes accepted another cigarette and stretched out a hand for the bottle. "Will you join me, Doctor?"

"No, thanks, and you shouldn't be drinking too much of that stuff till we've had a thorough examination."

Barium meals, the cold X-ray screen, the diet and warnings. All that was too late now, he felt sure of it. When he had submerged deeper into the green water a little while back and tried to focus more clearly on the tropical fish he had been certain that destiny had not planned for him the hospital bed. *'Each man has his own destiny, and if the road leads into the wilderness he must walk with shoulders straight . . . a smile upon his face. . . .'*

"Thorough examination?" Barnes repeated. "Where?"

"I would like to have you admitted to a hospital for a full check-up. I can only make a superficial examination here."

"Forgive me for saying so," Barnes said, "but I think I know about as much of my case as you do, perhaps more.

I've already been examined in a hospital. I *have* an ulcer. I've had it for months, it's like an old friend."

"Until it hurts, eh? Not such a friend then. And when does it hurt? Before a meal? And after?"

"Before I eat," Barnes said. "Not afterwards. And often in the night. I used to have sleeping pills, and some other sort of tablets to relieve the pain."

After all, the doctor had come at his request; he was paying the bill. He might as well get a good night's sleep out of it.

"I'll give you those things," the doctor said, "also the telephone number of my surgery. Perhaps you would be good enough to ring me tomorrow morning, and we can make all the necessary arrangements. In the meantime . . ." his eyes wandered to the brandy bottle again, ". . . I strongly advise you to drink as little as possible."

"I have to relax," Barnes said in defence.

"The pills will help you to relax."

"My nerves," Barnes tried again. "I work pretty hard, live on my nerves. I *need* a drink or two in the evenings."

"And in the mornings?" the doctor hazarded.

"Sometimes."

"I must be frank with you, Mister Barnes, otherwise I am wasting your time and mine."

"By all means be frank."

"I am far from happy about your physical condition."

"This ulcer. . . ."

"Apart from the ulcer. That is serious enough, but there are other symptoms which I will not go into now."

"You said something about being frank," Barnes said with irritation. "What other symptoms?"

"Since you ask me, a degree of alcoholic poisoning, extremely dangerous in view of the fact that the ulcer may be bleeding. Now, for your part, will you be co-operative with me . . . be truthful? Otherwise there's nothing I can do to help you, and I believe you need help."

The barium meal and the sharp tang of anæsthetics, or the confessional and the odour of garlic, which technique was being considered behind that professional urbanity?

"You'll need a deep-sea line, Doctor," Barnes said, "and a good strong hook. I'm in deep green water, where even some of the fish burst from the pressure."

The doctor was mystified. "I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"What bait would you use to hook me? Health, wealth? Or mental tranquillity? Not tasty enough. Not down here, where's it's so deep there's not even a current to drag me one way or the other."

"You've dragged me out of *my* depth," the doctor answered, and flashed his warm smile. It was quite genuine. There was something about Barnes he liked, although at this stage he could not tell what it was. "You must bear in mind that I'm a simple physician, not a mind-reader."

"You ought to have been a priest or a psychiatrist."

"Why?"

"You have the Jesus-like disarming smile, the eye-touch," Barnes said. Now that he was over his initial uneasiness the brandy fumes were again taking control. "Naturally, as a doctor, you have the finger-touch too, necessary and doubtless impressive. But the eye-touch, that's something different, eh, Doctor? More rewarding when probing for symptoms, eh?"

"Perhaps," the doctor answered, still a little mystified, "but let's get back to your physical needs. In the first place, I want fresh X-rays of your stomach, and secondly I'd like to have you in hospital for a few days and pump some strong doses of vitamins into you."

"My likes are somewhat simpler," said Barnes, "namely, another drink."

"The bottle's empty."

"Exactly, but we have room-service, you know."

"Well . . ." the doctor was uncertain as to how to deal with his patient, how best to soothe him and persuade him to

take the sleeping drug. Although outwardly calm, Barnes was mentally excited, as though the doctor's presence had presented him with some vague challenge.

"Perhaps one more drink," the doctor agreed, but Barnes was already on the telephone, ordering two large brandies. He had no intention of revealing the secret *cache* in his suitcase.

"You force me to drink one," the doctor said agreeably, "since I have no intention of allowing you to consume them both."

The wireless-set down the corridor was switched off, and the man in the adjoining room *hawk-hawk-hawked* as he cleared his throat into the basin.

The waiter who had earlier answered the bell appeared with the drinks and seemed relieved to see Barnes's improved condition and the doctor's air of unconcern.

Barnes sipped his drink and stared at the doctor. His face was rather square, with a sharp, competent look about the brown eyes. A little dart of pain stabbed Barnes's stomach. He leant forward and gave an 'aah' as it darted through his intestines and disappeared.

"Another pain?"

"I'm pregnant with uncertainty," Barnes answered facetiously. "Labour pains, nothing more."

"Uncertainty, Mister Barnes? You are uncertain of what?"

"You. Your hospital. Your X-rays and your vitamins. Even your eye-touches."

"We're on that subject again, are we?"

"Surely to Christ you, as a doctor, realise the importance?" Barnes flashed at him. He gulped his drink and beads of perspiration sprang out on his upper lip. "Anybody can finger-touch," Barnes persisted. "A man and woman, for instance, can finger-touch, lip-touch, body-touch. Through it, through touching the right places, they create the spark, the lust, the love-fire, it burns into them and they writhe in it and

feel its madness. For a virile man and a feminine woman that is nothing," Barnes continued excitedly; "bodily senses, reflexes, they respond under the right stimulus. But how many of those men and women can eye-touch, reach the inner eye and feel the exquisite golden flow inside them? How many of those women know how to harden the spiritual phallus, how to keep it alive within them, how to respond to it and how to caress it when it wants to fold back into itself?"

"Few," the doctor admitted, "but I don't need to be a priest or psychiatrist to see that."

"But you are a priest and a psychiatrist," Barnes said. He was a little drunk now, and desperately wanted this man to understand him. "I feel it. I feel that you *know*."

"We'll waive that point," the doctor said, "but tell me, are you a married man?"

"Of course."

"Why of course?"

"Every man's married—to himself, to his work, to his religion, to a system."

"Perhaps I should have asked if you have a wife."

"Yes," Barnes said irritably. "I have a wife."

"And with your wife, do you have this eye-touch of yours?"

"Never," Barnes answered quickly. "Finger-touch, flesh-touch, nothing more. And not much of that."

"I see," the doctor said, "and yet you must have had this eye-touching, you speak so surely about it."

Barnes eyed the doctor as a fighter might warily eye his opponent in the ring. "Of course, otherwise how should I know? You have to have experienced it, otherwise you *don't* know, however much you think you do. It isn't at all like first knowing a woman, like first experiencing the pleasure-shock of intercourse. When you first have that you know immediately that you have had it, but when you first feel that you have had spiritual intercourse you are not sure you *have* had it. It takes time, it grows, and it's only after constant experience that you

both breathe together in that indescribable golden flow. I can't explain it, Doctor, you have to *know* it, as I said."

"And you do know it?" the doctor repeated.

"I have known it" Barnes corrected him. "With a Dutch girl, here in Holland. I've lived in Holland, you know."

"I gathered that from your accent, the way you speak Dutch."

"It was after the war," Barnes explained, "I lived for some time with a Dutch girl, and we knew this eye-touching as well as the flesh-touching. We were *sure* of each other, not only in the little ways but in the important ways. When we fought we were as sure as when we made love. When we fought it strengthened us, because we were so sure that we were never afraid. Mostly, when a man and woman fight they fight because they aren't sure and *are* afraid—afraid that they have lost the touch with one another, afraid that what they had is gone, afraid that they are lost to one another. And that sort of fighting sooner or later does make them lost to each other. Fighting when you aren't afraid and when you are sure welds you more firmly together. You probably don't understand what I mean. Perhaps I don't understand, in so many words, but I understand the *feel* of it."

"I understand," the doctor said. "In fact it goes a long way to explain your present condition."

Barnes sobered up a little. He was immediately on his guard. "Explain *what* present condition?"

"Your health, your feelings. I don't suppose you would dispute the fact that, with your ulcer, you are most probably drinking yourself to death."

"Death, death. An ulcer doesn't necessarily mean death."

"Certainly not, but the combination of your ulcer, your drinking and the reasons behind that drinking might well do."

Barnes shrugged his shoulders and glanced at the empty brandy-bottle. "Before you arrived this evening," he told the doctor, "I was making a picture up in my mind. A picture I

would like to paint, not a very nice creation, I assure you, and I said to myself that people who examined it might say to themselves that the artist lived in God's blind eye. I liked that expression. It conveys something."

"God's blind eye?"

"Exactly. It brings to my mind something that is dark, or lost. Like a petrified forest, or shadows amongst pines, or a man groping desperately through fog as though his life depended on it. Doesn't it affect you like that?"

"I haven't had a chance to give it much thought."

"God's blind eye," Barnes said again. "But even men have blind eyes, isn't that so?"

"Yes, there are things they don't see, or can't see, I admit it."

"And God has a blind eye," Barnes said, "and men *live* in God's blind eye. The lost ones. The sick ones, either in mind or health. A man with cancer lives in God's blind eye, just as an alcoholic does. Or an imbecile, or even a genius, they sometimes do also. God doesn't see them. They exist out of range, if you see what I mean . . . lost . . ."

"And you?"

"Oh, yes, me. As a child I lived in the blind eye, and in the war I lived like that too. And with my wife. The only time I came within God's focus was with Jan. Then I really was in focus, I was blessed, as the saying goes. When she went out of me—back in the blind eye! I could feel it at once. Cut off again, abandoned."

"This frame of mind isn't healthy," the doctor said. "It might easily have brought about the ulcer in the first place."

"Of course it isn't healthy," Barnes snarled, "but living in God's blind eye isn't healthy. It kills in the end. You simply can't go on living in such *deadness*. I've had this deadness off and on throughout my life, and you simply can't go *on* living in it, you can't."

The doctor fumbled with his bag and took out two small

green capsules. He would have enjoyed carrying on with the conversation, but he wanted the patient to sleep, and he wanted him in hospital too. There was an unpredictable something in those dark, glowing eyes, and the doctor was only happy in the presence of the predictable.

He said, "I'm going to give you these two capsules. They will help to relax you, and you'll probably get some sleep. In the morning I would like you to telephone me." He laid a card on the table by the telephone.

"You won't be calling in?" Barnes asked, as though relieved.

"I won't be calling in. I'd like to see you helping yourself. Even a doctor needs reassurance, you know."

"You want to cure my ulcer?"

"Of course."

"And stop me drinking?"

"I can't stop you drinking. If you want to stop, the only person who can stop you is yourself. If you want to badly enough, that is. When you *do* want to, badly enough, you'll stop, not before."

"Even if it's killing me?"

"Even if it's killing you, and you know it's killing you, you won't stop until you want to *badly enough*."

"And what makes one want to stop *badly enough*, as you put it?"

The doctor smiled gently, "When you want to live in the sunshine again instead of in the shadow. When you want to think again, instead of fumbling with your mind. When you want to be happy, instead of hating yourself. I could go on for ten minutes, there are so many reasons." He half-closed his eyes. "But I don't think I need to. I think you know all these things."

When the door closed gently, Barnes knew those things, as the doctor had said. He knew the depression of alcohol, the loneliness, the utter desperation, the self-hatred. He was

aware too of the joy of life without it; living, as the doctor had said, in the sunshine instead of the shadow.

Yet his knowledge did not prevent him from going to the suit-case and taking out one of the bottles. He drew its cork, half-filled a glass and sucked it down. Then he lit a cigarette, climbed back in the bed and blew smoke-rings. He had enjoyed the doctor's visit, had liked him. Whether or not he would be content to be his patient in a hospital was another matter. Or it wasn't, really. He knew he would only go into hospital *in extremis*, when he was no longer capable of resisting. It was stupid, of course, as senseless as his continued drinking. But he was too far from the shallow end to pull himself out now.

The doctor had scarcely been gone ten minutes before he was back again. Barnes whipped the brandy bottle beneath his mattress, called, "Come in."

"So sorry. I remembered I had not left you the pills to kill the pain if it comes back in the night." He placed an envelope beside the green capsules by the telephone. "Take two if you feel discomfort, three if it hurts badly."

"And the green capsules?"

"Ah, since I'm here I might as well see you take them."

He fetched a glass of water from the basin. "Swallow them down. Good. Now, if you have a further supply of alcohol," his eyes wandered towards the suit-case, "which is more than likely, if you will forgive me doubting you. . . ."

Barnes grinned, and the doctor, noticing it, thought, 'It is the first time he has smiled naturally, meaningly, since I came in.' But he would have preferred that the smile had been for another reason.

"I told you you were a natural psychiatrist," Barnes said.

"Let's say I am seeing with the inner eye."

"Ah," Barnes answered, "ah, ah, *ah*. Now you have it."

Once more the doctor made for the door. Before opening it he asked, "Enlighten me on one point, Mister Barnes, will you?"

"If I can . . . delighted. . . ."

"Your living in God's blind eye. You said men in pain, men lonely, men in misery, *abandoned* men, lived this way?"

"So?"

"Jesus in Gethsemane . . . He was tortured there, alone, in

misery. Would you say that in the Garden He was living in God's blind eye?

"No," Barnes said quickly, "never. In the Garden, Jesus' sufferings were for man, for a *purpose*. If you suffer for a purpose, you *believe*, and that belief gives you the spirit-life. You aren't entirely abandoned if you live a spirit-life, and you live in God's eye. Jesus, in the Garden, lived *with* God, in God's eye. As for me," he continued lightly, as though mocking himself, "I suffer for no purpose, for nothing at all. I'm lonely because I have not the belief or the spirit-life. I live a kind of death, down in my ocean. Even my tentacles don't waver upwards any more. Take it from me, like thousands of others, I live in God's blind eye."

"Thank you," the doctor said, "I'll puzzle this one out on my way home. In the meantime. . . ." for some inexplicable reason he advanced towards the bed and offered Barnes his hand. He had not intended to. The gesture of friendliness had sprung up quite unconsciously, ". . . in the meantime, I look forward to your call in the morning."

Barnes made a grimace at the closing door. One of the little green capsules had stuck in his throat. He washed it down with a swill of cognac as soon as he heard the doctor's footsteps pad-padding down the corridor.

Down in the street a car started and drove away, whining in low gear. Probably the doctor. Barnes was surprised that he had spoken to him as he had done. Revealing his most trivial thoughts was not easy for him, yet he had begun to unburden himself and would have gone on had the doctor stayed. A doctor, of course, was a doctor, but if one argued on those lines, a priest was a priest. Was then the priest the peasant's psychiatrist and the psychiatrist the scholar's priest? And if so, where did the power of one begin and the other end?

Barnes began to feel too lethargic to pursue the notion. Probably the drug was beginning to work. He felt remarkably calm and none of his immediate problems were hammering

away at his nerves as they usually did. Perhaps, after all, a few days in hospital, under expert care, might avert the inevitable catastrophe creeping so steadily towards him.

But as soon as the thought occurred to him he dismissed it. Hospital was no answer. He had spent two months in one a year or two earlier, at Margaret's request. It had broken the drinking bout, and they had given him E.C.T. and insulin to relieve him of depression and restore his flagging nerves, but when he had left the hospital he was almost immediately down in the deep-green water once more, with the twilight more opaque than when they had hooked him out.

He wondered if, in the past few years, Jan had ever felt herself water-logged in these depths. She had her children, of course, just as Margaret had hers, and they might force one to remain on the surface. Yet he had never thought of Jan as a mother, and found it difficult to attribute to her any maternal instincts. She had loved them but had kept them very much in the background as though to reassure him that he was the first consideration.

Had he, in turn, ever attempted to assure her that she came first? He doubted it, gazing back over the years through the powerful lenses of the drug which now relaxed his body and heightened his perceptions.

Even when he had told her, guardedly, about his interview with the Colonel, he had been primarily concerned with the thought as to what repercussions the Army's interference would have on him. Yet the thought had not been entirely selfish. The Army had brought him to Holland and so had given him Jan, and could as easily remove him and rob him of her.

When he had returned from the depot that evening and had found Jan lying on the bed waiting for him he had said, "I was talking to the Colonel this evening."

"Oh, the famous Colonel," she had answered with a faint tinge of contempt in her voice, and with that they had both dismissed the subject. Its dismissal had been a short reprieve

for him, nothing more. He owed it to Jan to tell her, just as the Colonel had owed it to him to have a quiet word about it before it became an implacable regimental matter.

On the following evening Barnes had bought a cold goose from the NAAFI, and two bottles of hock from the Mess and had driven out to the Round House for a cold supper.

Jan had laid the table by the tiled stove and as she prepared the meal Barnes had sat back and allowed himself to be enveloped by the strange tranquillity which always emanated for him from the lounge. Being away from the road, at the end of the path guarded by the orderly rows of plane trees, the house was always very quiet. But there was something more than quiet. The lounge was circular, and gave one the impression of being cut off from everything, as in a lighthouse, as though life passed you by and the only contact you had with it was through the silent, silent flashing beam of light over dark seas, and the answering flicker of a ship's lamp, mysterious and remote.

Jan had sensed this too, for once, weeks before, when a gale had rattled the shutters and thumped in the attic, she had stretched herself by the stove, lazy and contented, and had said, "I'd never leave this house, never, never, never."

He had asked curiously, "Why?"

"It's hard to say, but it's always seemed to me to be a friend more than just bricks and mortar. I feel like the captain of my own little ship in it, remote from all the usual complications of life. And I truly get the feeling that I'm the master, and that the house knows, and is here to serve me, and sort of . . . well, sort of protect me. It seems silly to you, I expect. But the way I feel about it is how one feels when your dog crouches over you, full of love and protection." She smiled. "That's it, however mad it sounds, the house loves me and protects me, and you can think what you like about it, my dear lover."

But it was true. He felt the same, and found he had the

crazy notion that the house had accepted him, and approved their union.

When they had finished the meal, and were sitting on the settee with their coffee, Barnes said again, "I saw the Colonel yesterday."

"You told me that last night before you had your bath, darling," Jan answered. "I hope he's in the best of health."

"He's always in the best of health," Barnes growled. "A regular officer has to be, otherwise somebody stamps on his neck in his absence and gets the promotion."

"Forgive me if I don't clasp my hands and show surprise," Jan said, "but I'm afraid I don't gather the significance of your seeing the dear Colonel. You're always seeing him, aren't you?"

"On Service matters, yes."

"And this wasn't?"

"No."

She stirred her coffee, then put the cup and saucer on the floor. "It was . . . about us?"

"Exactly."

"I hate that man more than ever. Why can't he keep his nose out of our affairs?"

"Don't be too hard on him, Jan. He was doing it as a favour to me . . . to us both, really."

"Can't we live our lives without having to earn *his* favours?"

"I feel exactly as you do about it, but we must try and see it from his angle. It was brought to his attention by Brigade, and he's trying to settle it out of court, if you understand the expression."

"Out of court, out of court," she flared, "what do you mean, *out of court*? You're surely not going to tell me that the Army wants to make an official matter out of a private affair which doesn't concern them in the least?"

"They think it does," he said gently. "You know how an army thinks."

"I don't," she said, "and I don't want to, if that's their mentality."

"Look at it from the Colonel's point of view."

"*You* look at it from his point of view. He's your colonel, thank God, and I must say that this doesn't make me think any more of him than I did before."

"You don't know him," Barnes said mildly.

Jan's dark eyes flashed angrily. "Perhaps I don't, but I've heard about him. They're all the same, these colonels. By God, Rudolf's one, and that fact doesn't make me want to kiss the ground they walk on."

Barnes laughed aloud. "Rudolf's a tooth-puller," he said. "Don't confuse him with a soldier."

Jan's lips trembled with anger. "Go on, laugh, bray like an ass, but it doesn't amuse *me* to have my name bandied about your dépôt."

Barnes drained his coffee and lit a cigarette. He understood her anger, for he had been angry himself the day before and had had time to get over it.

"Your name isn't being bandied round the dépôt. It's a private matter between the Ambassador, the Brigadier, the Colonel and myself."

"The Ambassador, the Brigadier, the Colonel and yourself! My God, what a nice compact little circle. Why not the King of England and Prince Bernhardt? Shouldn't they have been let into the secret?"

"Do try and be reasonable," he answered.

"*Reasonable!* You can ask a lot of things of me, but don't ask me to be reasonable about a thing like *this*. The *Ambassador!* What has a private matter of our own got to do with your *Ambassador?*"

Barnes was enjoying himself. Her fury exhilarated him. Her cheeks were flushed and her breast rose and fell in agitation. Rarely had she looked more desirable. "How about another cup of coffee?"

"I'll throw it in your face if you don't tell me what this Colonel had to say. I'd like to have him here . . . I'd like to. . . ."

"To what?"

She grinned in fury. "Empty the coffee-pot over his stupid head, and then add milk and sugar. . . ." She paused for breath.

"And then?" he teased.

"Then . . . then . . . then ram his stupid cap back-to-front on his stupid skull and kick him out of the door."

"You would, would you?" Leaning over, he clasped her shoulders and kissed the tip of her nose. She drew away and pushed his arms down.

"Don't think you can get away with *that* sort of thing," she said. "You and your Army have insulted me and now you want to kiss and cuddle and forget all about it."

"How have *I* insulted you?"

"By listening to this Colonel of yours. You should have told him to jump in the river."

"Of course," Barnes said, "one tells one's superior officers to jump in rivers. The best possible way to achieve a distinguished career in the Army."

"O, David, David, don't go on making a joke out of it . . . please! This isn't funny, it's serious." Her black eyes opened wide and the anger went out of them and a little fear took its place. "What can they do about us? Can they do anything?"

"Not to you."

It was her turn to touch him. "But to you. To *you*, darling . . . they can do something?"

"If I'm not careful."

"Tell me, darling, what did he say?"

It was hot by the stove. Through the open iron doors the logs spluttered like the burning touch-papers of fireworks.

"He was magnificently tactful and non-committal. He informed me that our alliance had not gone unnoticed."

"The pompous ass," Jan said. Although her face was flushed still, the last vestige of anger had gone. Now she fought against a growing anxiety for him, for herself, for a parting which, in the last minute or two, had seemed to roar towards them as relentlessly as flood-water.

"It appears," Barnes said slowly, "that people have been talking."

"Which people?"

He gave her a significant glance. "Not only the *depôt* staff, but Dutch people . . . your so-called friends."

Her anger mounted in her face once more, only to subside and crouch in her restless hands. "By my friends I take it you mean Bea and Christopher?"

"Who else?"

"You never did like them."

"No, I never did," said Barnes, and added with the conceit which Jan at times admired and at other times detested, "I have a sixth sense about people, you see."

"They never did you any harm."

"Not directly, except to make me dislike them. I resent people who set about earning your dislike. There's generally a reason for it, certainly in their case—or Bea's, I should add."

Bea and Christopher were the Dutch friends whom Jan had been with at the Officers' Club on the night Barnes had met her.

Bea was in her middle forties, but looked older. Her face had collapsed prematurely and had left the flesh beneath the chin hanging in puckered folds. She used too much make-up; the powder made her already pale skin look doughy, and the eye-shadow gave one the impression that she had not slept well for months. Her thin, curved fingers with their blood-red nails completed the predatory air about her and made one aware that she was dangerous. What Jan liked about her, God only knew. She always managed to look frustrated and bitter, like an aged prostitute who had discovered that her ponce was spending his money on younger women.

"Bea," Jan said. "I can't believe it."

"Haven't I always warned you to watch your step with her?" Barnes said irritably. "She's a natural for type-casting, a witch, and bitch into the bargain."

"I've known her since I was a child," Jan said. "Perhaps to you, a stranger, she might look like that. To me she doesn't look much different from the girl I used to go horse-riding with, or to tea-parties."

"Horse-riding with . . . to tea-parties . . . with *Bea*?"

"One has friends. You have to be loyal to friends until you prove something against them."

"Well, that shouldn't be difficult. I can soon find out from the Colonel."

"Don't bring anybody else into it," Jan pleaded, "or stir it all up again. Don't start asking your Colonel *questions*."

"Very well, I won't," Barnes answered. In turn he was beginning to get cross. Why couldn't she see that to Bea she was nothing more than a succulent tit-bit of gossip? He knew from experience how perilous misplaced loyalty could be.

"Then Christopher must have put her up to it."

Barnes jumped from the settee and opened a window. The curtains danced, muscled by the chill air.

"Let's see if a cold air douche can straighten up your thinking," he said sarcastically. "Christopher put her up to it! Don't make me laugh. Imagine Christopher putting anybody up to anything, particularly his dear little Bea!"

Christopher was tall, slim, with attractive iron-grey hair. He looked younger than his wife, and carried himself erectly, like a Prussian officer out of uniform. He had painstakingly rehearsed himself in this demeanour, a defence against the powdered and rouged malignance of his wife. But he said little, particularly to her. She quickly stifled any of *his* opinions with one venomous look.

They were a magnificent pair—she wearing her expensive jewellery with the ostentation of a chambermaid trying it on in

her mistress's absence, he regarding her sideways with the embarrassment of the master caught pinching the chambermaid's bottom.

"I can't think of any reason why Bea should try to hurt me," Jan said. "We've always got on well together."

"Did you ever try to sleep with Christopher?" Barnes asked.

"Don't be beastly."

"Well then, I can only assume that she's jealous of you, and of me, of our contentment with one another."

"I suppose so," Jan agreed with resignation, "but it's a bit much."

"A bit much is what we English call an under-statement. A bit much, you say. When you come to consider that what this precious Bea has done has pretty well put the cap on our living with one another, a bit much is superb!"

"No," she said quickly, "that can't be true. Even Bea, or your Colonel, or your Brigadier, they couldn't do that. Could they, David?"

"They can do anything," Barnes told her. "A snake like Bea can accomplish anything evil, and the Army system can accomplish anything good or evil."

"No, no, *no*. We must do something about it. I can speak to Bea . . . or to Christopher. . . ."

"You aren't going to give them that satisfaction," Barnes flashed out, "that's just what she wants. Don't chuck a victory in her skinny lap.' Can't you *see* that after all your trips to Brussels with me, your new clothes, your sweet, lovely *chic* appearance, your parties with me in the Club and Mess, our week-ends at Noordwijk, can't you see that all she wants in exchange for those is her *victory* out of your mouth. Don't give it, darling. Let her go to hell in her own way. She will, some day."

"But we must do something."

At this moment the end which she had dreaded seemed

terrifyingly near to Jan. It towered about her like black cliffs, with Bea's merciless, angry tide sealing her last way of escape.

"But you'll still . . . come here?" And she waved uncertainly at the room and its isolation.

"Of course," Barnes said grimly, "but not so frequently. And you mustn't go to the hotel and wait in my room for me. We must at least try and be practical about this business, for both our sakes."

Jan said, in an agony of turbulence, "We're grown-up people, over twenty-one. We're responsible human beings. Our lives are our own. Surely we have a *right* to do what we think *right*? I'm not harming my husband. He knows our life, our *married* life, is over. He accepts it. He's thousands of miles away, what harm can it do him, when he's *accepted* it? And the children, they don't know, they are too young, and so much can happen before they reach the age to know. By then we'll probably have said good-bye. But not *yet* . . . *not yet* . . ."

Barnes longed to comfort her, yet a distorted pleasure in her unhappiness made him say harshly, "So far as the Army is concerned we aren't responsible for our lives. So far as your husband is concerned he is responsible for yours. In a way, that bitch Bea is responsible for your life too. As you say, she's your life-long friend. Good. Then in a manner she's responsible for you whilst Rudolf's away pulling teeth in the East Indies. What answer have you to this? Eh, Jan? Have you any argument that any court would accept?"

Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "To hell with your courts and your Army and Bea . . . and *Ruuudolf* as well, I don't accept any of your stupid reasons." Even in her anger and anguish she pronounced the tooth-puller Rudolf with the long *u*. How much she must be alienated from him!

"When you're up against a system," Barnes said, "you have no choice either to accept or to refuse anything. Big Brother is your master. Big Brother and the system stand side by side.

What we have to do is think of ways to fool Big Brother and the system, not ways of bashing our heads against them. Dry your eyes and make some more coffee, you know you love making coffee in an argument."

"I'm not crying," she answered defiantly, "and if you want coffee, go and make it yourself. Big Brother! Who the hell is Big Brother? The Army? Or Bea the Big Sister? You know what you can do with Big Brother and Big Sister," she finished rudely, "you can stuff them up your jumper, as your sweet little Army says."

"No doubt Bea would love to be stuffed, but not by me and not by you. She'll stuff herself one day, and I hope I live to see it. If I had to leave the Army and live in a garret here in Holland it would be worth it to see *that* day."

She answered dangerously, frightened for them both, "Just watch out you don't stuff yourself one day, that's all!"

"You and your stuffing," he said, and fumbled in his tunic pockets for his pipe and tobacco. "Go and make some coffee, and see if there's any of that brandy left. If we've achieved nothing else, we've achieved a thirst, my little Jan."

She rose and rattled bottles in the cupboard. When she had put the brandy and glasses on the table she went out into the kitchen and Barnes heard the pop of the gas lighting.

He bit on the stem of his pipe and thought, 'All this because of the bitch Bea.'

He had never liked her, and on their third meeting had actively distrusted her. She and Christopher had called for tea at the Round House, and upon entering she had simpered up to Barnes with her blood-tipped claw extended.

"Ah, Captain Barnes, how delightful to meet you like this, for a cosy chat. We've so looked forward to it, haven't we, Christopher?" And Christopher, from his Prussian officer's rather remote height, had looked as though he had something in his mouth which he wanted to spit out. "Jannie has told us so much about you, even after this short time."

Barnes always cringed when they referred to Jan as Jannie. Jannie! What lay behind *that* grotesque abbreviation?

"Of course," she had continued, "we've known her since she was quite small. We knew the family too. And, of course, dear Rudolf's family. You never met Rudolf, did you? Such a sweet boy . . . so brave and considerate. A wonderful father too. Do you realise, he actually challenged the German Forces in the war? Challenged them for more food and little luxuries for Jannie and the children."

'Well,' Barnes had thought, 'I suppose pulling a man's bloody teeth out is a kind of challenge, after all.'

Instead he said, "How enterprising of him. A tooth for a loaf, eh? A gum-boil for a gum-drop. Very shrewd, and certainly a challenge, as you say."

Jan had given him a warning look, and Prussian officer Christopher had unbent his resolute body into a chair and had given both Jan and Barnes the queerest winks behind Bea's back.

With a kind of evil satisfaction in a worthy adversary Bea had blown air into her cracked cheeks so that they wrinkled out like used balloons. "A sense of humour, too, Captain. You have all the accomplishments, as Jannie told us. Are you long with us in the Hague? Such a pity if you were to be posted back. We need such accomplishments . . . and poor Jannie needs them . . . she has such a lonely time of it with Rudolf thousands of miles away, living under Heaven knows what conditions. To think he fought his own private war here in the Hague during those awful Occupation years, and now gets cut off from his Jannie and his children and thrown into that ghastly climate, of all things. I must say I heartily disapprove of our Administration behaving in that manner, I assure you. My father was a general, you know, and he would never have approved of that lack of gratitude."

"Perhaps the General could get him sent Red Cross parcels," Barnes ventured, "or arrange for a black girl or two to keep house for him. Or perhaps Christopher could go out

and pay him a little visit and give him the news from home?"

Christopher, who had said nothing, clamped his legs together as though he were in danger of urinating, and said, "Hah, hah, hah."

Bea drew her lips back over her yellowish teeth in a kind of grinning snarl, "You say the most refreshing things, Captain. You really must come to some of our parties. We so need fresh blood to stimulate them. And it would give you an admirable opportunity to know more of Jan's background. Don't you think it vital to know a companion's background, her interests? As old friends of Jannie's, we were so delighted when you came to make a friend of her. She needs friendship, you know. The war wasn't kind to her—to any of us, for that matter. But she was quite a young bride then, so vulnerable, just as she is so vulnerable now. Isn't that one of her greatest attractions, don't you think, her vulnerability?"

"As a Professor Joad in our country says," Barnes answered, "it depends what you mean by vulnerability. I must say it sounds vulgar to me."

The Prussian officer *hah-hahed* from the sanctuary of his chair, and Bea turned her head and shot him a visual charge of acid.

Jan, who had been in the kitchen arranging the tea for the past few minutes, popped her head round the door and asked, "Are you getting on well, you three?"

Naturally, she wanted them to 'get on well'. Bea and the Prussian officer were her life-long friends, and Barnes was, after all, her lover.

"Perfectly," Barnes said. "Bea is telling me about your vulnerability. Amongst your treasures I hadn't discovered that yet, I must say. So you see what friends can do, they can bring to light hidden assets."

"The Captain has a subtle mind, Jannie," Bea said. "I was speaking of vulnerability in its academic sense. Captain Barnes seems to connect it in some way with your spiritual virginity."

"I say, steady on," Barnes said. "Don't let's get too intimate. What does she mean, *Jannie*, your spiritual virginity?" and he grinned wickedly at Jan and the Prussian officer.

"Most entertaining," *Bea* said, and accepted the cup of tea which Jan offered her. "Unfortunately poor Rudolf was never blessed with a sense of humour, was he, Christopher?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"You knew him intimately," *Bea* said crossly. "You must have been aware of that."

"I don't quite remember, my dear," Christopher said with triumph, and crossed his knees as though, with great will-power, he had prevented himself from making water.

"Poor Ruuudolf," Jan said, "I wonder if he will find the black girls amusing. What do you think, *Bea*? Will they entertain him, h'm?"

"Perhaps, when he's filled the holes in their teeth in," said Barnes.

"Seriously though," Jan said, "he'll have the time of his life out there. The climate isn't bad, and they're looked after like little tin gods. I hope he *does* enjoy himself. And it's good of Jumbo to arrange little outings for me."

"Jumbo?" *Bea* looked startled and spilt her tea. "Jumbo? Who on earth is Jumbo, may I ask?"

"Captain Barnes," Jan said, "David here."

Bea turned her scrawny neck and gave the Prussian officer a significant look. "Well, really. . . ."

"It's no secret," said Jan, "no secret at all that Jumbo is my elephant, *Bea*." And she added naughtily, "You ought to see his trunk. Go on, Jumbo, show *Bea* your trunk."

"Another day, perhaps," Barnes answered, "when we go to one of *Bea*'s little parties. It's my party-piece," he explained to the outraged *Bea*, "but I only exhibit to my dearest friends, so you must consider yourself as a dear friend, you and the Prussian gentleman here."

"*Prussian gentleman?*" *Bea* exploded; "what Prussian

gentleman? These games, Jan, really. This is a side of you I have never seen before."

She used the full name Jan as the mark of her disapproval.

"I mean your Prussian gentleman husband," Barnes explained. "Don't you quite see him in that light, Bea? Really, he is a credit to you. I would love to be called a Prussian gentleman husband, but I never am, so there's no good in crying over spilt milk."

Christopher coughed embarrassedly into his handkerchief and searched in its depth for some sign of a dread disease.

Bea rubbed her claws together as though sharpening their tips. "The English have a quite remarkable sense of fun. Puppets, for instance . . . don't your people love to make puppets dance, Captain Barnes?"

"I'm afraid I haven't much interest in puppets," Barnes apologised, "but surely the Dutch enjoy them too. The Russians are excellent puppeteers," and, as though not wishing to leave Christopher alone in his brocade ivory tower, added, "and the Prussians also, so I believe. You must have an interest in them, Bea. Can you make them dance to your tune? Could you make *Jannie* and me dance? I'm sure you would like to try. Well, we don't mind, do we, *Jannie*? Do you mind if Bea tries to make us dance?"

Jan, anxious to avoid the impending explosion, asked, "More tea, Bea . . . Christopher? And another of these little cakes? Not home-made, unfortunately. You remember my home-made cakes, Bea?"

Bea poked a cigarette into a long holder and puffed furiously. "Of course I remember them, my dear, but I imagine you don't have time for cooking, what with Rudolf away, and all that."

"*Ruuudolf* always detested my home-made cakes," Jan answered. "That's why it was always a pleasure to have you and Christopher round to tea."

"Really," Bea said, "you had us round to tea to eat your

cakes. How nice. And does the Captain like them?"

"David likes anything, don't you, David?"

Barnes looked at Bea pointedly. "With reservations."

"What a useful man to know," Bea said through tight lips. "And have you two been playing in Brussels recently?" She gave a hard look at Jan's new suede shoes and the delicately-laced blouse over her clerical grey skirt. "They tell me that Brussels is just what it was before the war. The shops full, gay, glamorous, no shortages."

"It really is, Bea," Jan said. "They have everything imaginable there. How they did it, I can't guess."

"Perhaps their period of Occupation wasn't what *we* understood as Occupation. If one was *really* occupied by those brutish Germans one wouldn't have full shops and no shortages *now*."

"Including re-painting the brothels," Barnes said, and ignored Jan's warning look.

Bea chose to ignore this remark also. "Well, that is one wonderful thing you have done for Jannie, Captain, made it possible for her to indulge in her obsession for pretty clothes." She glanced at Jan's lovely, silk-covered knees as though she would like to bite them. "With Rudolf's senior rank, *Captain*, she was usually in a position to keep herself smartly dressed. And now . . . now she looks *radiant*," and Bea cracked an imaginary nut between her teeth.

The Prussian officer lit a short cheroot and looked at his watch.

"You don't have to go so soon, Christopher, do you?" Jan asked. "Do you, Bea?"

"We have things to do in life," Bea said. "We like to keep ourselves busy, you know."

"Your committees?" Jan asked. "Your hospital visits and bridge, etcetera?"

"Amongst other things. And Christopher has his work to do."

"Really," Barnes said with interest. "And how do you

occupy yourself, Christopher, when Bea is busy with her etceteras?"

"Oh, business, you know," the Prussian officer answered, and spat a particle of tobacco at the stove. "We aren't all Army officers, you know," he went on good-humouredly, "and much as I liked the Army, I wouldn't care to be in it now."

"You were in the Army?"

"For seven months, before the Occupation?"

"You did the best you could," Bea put in. "The Occupation wasn't *your* fault."

"Forgive my being vague," Barnes said, "but do you mean occupation in the academic sense, or did you mean more the sense of capitulation?"

The Prussian officer's eyebrows shot up, and Bea twisted on her seat as though there were nails in it.

"We all had our Dunkirk, Captain," then she leaned down for her hand-bag, stuffed the cigarette-holder in it and closed it with a snap.

"Call me Jumbo," Barnes invited cordially, "and please offer them a gin or whisky before they go, Jan."

"Of course," Jan said, and glanced at Barnes with hostility. "A gin or whisky, Bea?"

"Neither, thank you," Bea said in a tone indicating she had no wish to drink the price of sin. "Anyway, Christopher has business to attend to." She rose to her feet, and the Prussian officer snapped to attention behind her.

"It was lovely seeing you," Jan said, "and you, Christopher. You both must come and have a little dinner one evening, h'm? David would be delighted, wouldn't you, David?"

"Of course. Then perhaps we could discuss the various aspects of Dunkirk and capitulation. I'll bring along a few bottles of champagne and my book on military conduct in warfare."

Bea gave him a frozen look but kissed Jan's cheek with pity.

Christopher said good-bye, and they slammed the front door behind them.

After their departure Jan said, "That was a dirty remark of yours about occupation and capitulation. You might remember that they're friends of mine, and that I was entertaining them in *my house*."

"Then bring them along to the Mess," Barnes said, "on my stamping-ground, as it were."

"Don't try and be clever," she answered. "They've gone away furious with me."

"And with me," Barnes reminded her.

"With you! What does that matter? You aren't an old friend, and a friend of the family."

"For which I thank God."

"You have some rotten streaks in you. It was absolutely despicable to make that crack about Christopher's seven months in the Army. And the Occupation wasn't any fault of ours, let me tell you. It might have done some of you English good to have had the Boche strutting round your streets with their Gestapo dragging your families away in the night. And to have starved, and seen your children starve."

"You didn't starve," Barnes said. "There was always Ruudolf!"

She flung the cups and saucers on the tray and said, on her way to the kitchen, "Don't they call you Army people the Dunkirk Harriers? Very apt. It was a good remark on Bea's part."

Barnes was too amused to be angry. But he didn't see much of Bea and the Prussian officer again.

Now, as he sat on the settee with Jan, he blamed himself to a certain extent for any harm Bea had done.

"What else did the Colonel say?"

"He more or less warned me to be more discreet in the future."

The anxiety in Jan's eyes lightened. "Then . . . do you

think, if we're more careful, we can go on seeing one another?"

"We're going to go on seeing one another," Barnes said.

"Don't worry about that, Jan, we are! But we have to be more careful, as I told you."

She put her hand on his khaki knee and said, "Darling, we couldn't let them break us up, could we?"

"We won't. I can always resign my commission, you know."

"Don't let it come to that, David! You love the Army, after all."

"Love the Army?" Barnes repeated with surprise. "Love a system? Love the Army or a system more than you? Don't make those sorts of jokes, darling; even with my magnificent sense of humour, I don't find them funny."

It is one of the vagaries of the mind that it can switch from dejection to exhilaration for no explicable reason. At this moment Barnes felt no anxiety over the Colonel's warning. Perhaps Jan's fears had dissolved his own. In any event, he now felt himself more the hunter than the hunted. If he ferreted out the source of his C.O.'s information, and found it to be Bea, he was ready to cross rather sharper swords with her in the future. It would serve no purpose other than to assuage his desire for revenge but, like Hitler in the bunker, he would derive a certain satisfaction from that.

His fresh mood was not lost on Jan.

"What has changed, David?"

"Changed?"

"Yes, something has. Between making this coffee and pouring it you're transmitting confidence waves all over the room."

"Really," Barnes answered. Sometimes the penetration of her inner eye was disconcerting. "If you must know, I was thinking of our mutual friends Bea and the Prussian gentleman. We haven't seen them for weeks."

"Naturally, darling. They don't like sticking their heads in a wasps' nest any more than anyone else."

Barnes sipped his coffee and cursed at its heat.

"Why don't we have them round one evening?" he asked, "after all, they are your life-long chums."

"I don't like this," Jan said suspiciously, "and I do wish you wouldn't keep calling Christopher the Prussian gentleman. It makes him sound absurd."

"He is absurd."

"On the contrary, he's kind and thoughtful. I admit Bea's done quite a lot to make him rather a mouse, but you couldn't call it *his* fault."

"Why not? Why doesn't he get rid of her? I can understand a man taking a drop of poison once, to experiment, as it were, but when he consistently takes it, knowing it's killing him, then I consider him a bloody fool. Yes, my dear, the Prussian gentleman is absurd."

"At least he's harmless. If anybody's done any talking, it's Bea."

"Well, it's something that you're changing your point of view. And while we're on the subject of names, why don't you get them to stop calling you *Jannie*!"

"All my friends do."

"I don't."

"You," she said, "are you my friend then?"

"I like you and love you, and that makes me your friend *and* lover. An unusual combination, but that's what we've found, and so we've found the precious stone. I once told you that with Margaret I liked her but didn't love her and she felt the reverse about me. That's the paste. It powders at slight and unexpected pressures. The precious stone can withstand serious blows. We're lucky, Jan, and we must remember that."

"You can always lose a precious stone," Jan said.

Barnes had no answer to that. When one recovered an article after having lost it, too frequently it never felt the same. Once, in London, he had lost his new car, and when it was

returned with an additional hundred miles or so on the clock he had not the same affection for it. Doubts crept in. What invisible harm had been done to it? What stranger had outraged its gears with indifference?

"To get back to Bea and partner, how about a little party here next week? There's plenty of drink in the Mess, and all the food we want. You say the day and I'll send my driver out with a gala hamper."

Jan said a little crossly, "I do wish you'd tell me what all this is about. Why on earth do you want to punish yourself with an evening's drinking with people you detest?"

"I don't detest the Prussian gentleman. He's a kind of a pet, and we might chain him in a corner and feed him gin and see if he barks, or even talks. And does Bea sing, do you remember? Was she a choir-girl with you, as well as a chum with horses and tea-parties?"

The blood washed up delicately beneath Jan's cheeks. "I sometimes prefer your angry moods to this!"

"But if Bea sings, we can have comic opera," Barnes persisted aggravatingly, "comic opera and a pet dog that both barks and talks. What an evening's fare. Incidentally, a thing I've never asked you before: is Bea short for Beatrice?"

Jan nodded with annoyance.

"Then let's stick to Bea. Beatrice puts me in mind of a rather staid spinster. As for Bea, well, Bea has the flavour of a peasant about it."

He moved behind her, leaned over the settee, ran his hands beneath her sweater and held for a moment her warm breasts. She remained immobile. Then he kissed the back of her neck and went whistling into the bedroom to find his tunic.

Jan had an overwhelming desire to throw the hot coffee percolator at him. However, she remembered the incident of locking him from the house and the subsequent entry of the Humber's bumper and headlights through the front-door, and resisted her impulse.

Barnes lay in a cocoon of electric heat and sodium-amatol. The drug was playing strange tricks on his ear-drums. The eleven chimes of the clock from the Palace sounded muffled, as though the clapper was gloved in suède. An unaccustomed quiescence pillowed his brain and he was distrustful of it. Like most uncontrolled drinkers he feared drugs. The thought of slavery to such a terrible and demanding master had so far kept him from its clutches.

However, this was prescribed, but he wanted no more, no more. . . .

He held his hands beneath the lamp and the veins snaked beneath the skin like roads under a pilot's cockpit. They were an old man's hands, thin and stiff from the clamps of alcohol. Useless in many ways, for they had lost their strength of grip and could scarcely write an intelligible scrawl. Often his cheques had been returned from the bank marked 'signature illegible', and on important business letters he had been forced to ask acquaintances to sign his name beneath the typed contents.

And one held their lives in their hands. A play of words, but what an ironical play!

He tried cracking his knuckles, waiting with patience for the final onslaught of the drug—insensibility, dreamless sleep. But still the pages of his mind flicked over and a stubborn trait forced his attention on them.

Why should he have lain here for the past days pawing over his life, sniffing for the old *live* scents? They said a man's recollections became vivid at the point of drowning, perhaps even a condemned man's also, but no threat of death hung on

such a brittle thread so far as he was concerned. Unless the ulcer bit the life cord, and there was time enough for that.

Anyway, he accepted the prospect of an early death—you can't live on memories, as he had been doing recently, and so you died. He admitted to himself that the doctor's drugs were probably at the bottom of this rather grand 'don't-really-care' attitude towards such a clammy subject. He ought really to be shocked. Without those little green capsules he felt certain he would be. The death of others never failed to jar him, even when on the grand scale, such as he had heard about at the Nuremberg Trials.

When studying those bleak records before coming to Holland in the earlier days he had been convinced that the repetition of those hideous crimes would eventually have bored him. But they never had. Each account of atrocity in the seemingly never-ending atrocities had jabbed him in the stomach as the ulcer jabbed him now.

For example, he remembered reading the official account of the Commandant Gabauer's activities in the concentration camp of Yanow when barbarity reached its peak. Gabauer, with his own hands, used to strangle women and children. He froze men to death in barrels, shot them, hanged them and gassed them; murder became so monotonous that the staff were officially encouraged to devise new methods, and one of them, named Wepke, made a bet that he could cut a boy in half with one stroke of his axe. The bet was taken. Wepke got hold of a ten-year-old boy in the camp, made him kneel down with his head hidden in the palms of his hands, and after taking a practice swing, with a single stroke cut the boy in two.

He recalled the evidence given by a deserter from the infamous SS '*Das Reich*' Panzer Division whose task it was to 'clear-up' the population in France just before the Allied invasion of Normandy. The deserter submitted his brief account:

"During these operations the officers wore no badges of rank, not wishing to be recognised. First we cleared up the country around Agen within a radius of seventy kilometres. The population of many villages were searched and massacred and the officers raped the youngest women. After the operation was over, the officers searched the soldiers and took away all objects of value from them. All cattle was taken by the Divisional Supply column, as supplies from Germany had been cut off.

"Some kilometres from Agen when we were passing through a small hamlet of some twelve houses a woman about thirty years old was watching us from a window. Seeing a lorry halted by the roadside our Company Commander asked her, 'Are there any Maquis here?' 'No,' she answered. 'Then whose is this lorry?' 'I don't know,' she replied. Without further questioning she was dragged down from the first floor, undressed, beaten with cudgels and hanged bleeding from a nearby tree.

"Further on, our convoy stopped in front of a large house over which the tricolour was flying. Our Company Commander opened fire on the front of the building and the owner came out: the officer immediately shot him in the chest. All the occupants were made to come out and the five women were taken away in one of the trucks. The convoy then left, all of us singing and firing our rifles as we drove through the village. Passing through the country after leaving the village, we fired at anyone working in the fields, and their horses, cows and dogs were also machine-gunned.

"From there we went to Limoges and the next day we continued cleaning up in the Haute-Vienne. Everything in our path was killed, and the women undressed, raped and hanged from trees. On 6th of July we arrived at St. Junien. That evening, while the company was searching for provisions, I managed to get away, unable any longer to endure such sights."

They were two examples, in many hundreds, which were impressed indelibly and in horrifying detail in Barnes's memory. Why was it that they should rise to the surface of his

mind so frequently? And why now? Was it perhaps because of his present preoccupation with death? A test of some sort to discover if the drug blurred their effect upon him? It did not, for in retrospect they filled him with the same horror as when he had read about them.

He abandoned the question and lit a cigarette. The tap was dripping in the basin, and in order to slow the unpredictable and tangled train of thoughts he began to count them. *One . . . two . . . three fifteen . . . sixteen . . . seventeen . . .*

He became bored with the exercise, and concentrated instead on de Groot and the mysterious mission to Amsterdam. Provided the job involved no serious risk he was prepared to undertake it. He might even make enough money to have a few weeks in the South of France or Jamaica—time enough to lie about in the sun and rest and dry the alcohol out of his system. Were it possible to leave it alone for three weeks he might emerge from the deep-green water and swim on the surface once more. He was only forty, after all, and he began to hum rather foolishly, "Life begins at forty . . . life begins at forty . . . take Phyllosan and life begins at forty. . . ."

It would mean complete mental readjustment. With a will-power which he knew at the moment he did not possess he must rid himself of this dark brooding, of the increasingly persistent picture of the final end. Accounts of war-crimes, which his military duties had forced him to study with infinite care, must be weighted with his fresh hopes and allowed to sink into the deep-green water. Also, of course, he would have to destroy shimmering opium pipes which Jan had left him.

'If I can get away . . . if I can only get away. . . ' Then first and foremost he must quit Holland and let the opium pipes smoke away in the Round House and on the beaches of Noordwijk.

As though treating himself to a final fling, a last pipe before the surfacing, he poured himself three-quarters of a tumbler of

brandy, added water, and drank half the mixture in long gulps.

As though planning his new life he left his bed and collected Margaret's unopened letter from his suit to see what remained to be settled in the old.

DEAR DAVID,

Through one of your friends I found out the name of your new company, and the fact that they had sent you to Holland. Strange, surely, that you should finish back there, when it was Holland eleven years ago that changed you so much. I expect you knew, as I did, that the new David was no David for me. Not that our life was ever much, was it? Your friends certainly weren't *my* idea of friends, and Mother and Father could never bear them. I hope you will admit to yourself that you made my life pretty unbearable, and I lost a lot of my old school friends through the way you treated them—and me.

Father considers it was probably due to your early life, or existence, more like it—and said I ought to take that into consideration. I'm sorry, but I cannot. I certainly have no wish to spend the rest of my life living with a man with his head in the clouds, who hasn't a thought for me or the children. Neither could I bear a husband who drinks as your father drank. Do you think I didn't know? Father made it his business to find out all about it, and you can't blame him, it was for my protection.

You once told me that I would be happier married to a clerk who tripped off to his desk at nine in the morning and came home to watch television in the evening. Well, I would. And I intend to. I think now that I must tell you I am arranging to divorce you, and I warn you against contesting it. Father has found all the evidence necessary, and he is as pleased as I am that I'm taking this step. Mother agrees too. And I am, of course, applying for custody of the children. I leave it to any decency you may have not to try

to visit them. As Father says, we can take steps to prevent *that*, but I don't want to take that step at present. I believe in showing some mercy.

You will also like to know there won't be any question of you keeping me or the children. I am marrying one of Father's junior managers, who loves both me and the children. He's a fine man, and you have no need to worry about us, that is, if you ever would.

Well, David, that's that. You may think I'm being cruel, but I leave it to you to examine yourself and find out if that is so. You'll agree that I gave you a dozen and one chances to redeem yourself, but it was impossible. Particularly after you came back to England. I never knew what happened there to make such a strange difference to you, and I never want to know. That's locked up in you, and can stay locked, as far as I and my mother and father are concerned.

I hope, for your sake, that Holland changes you back. That might help you. With that wish I end this letter. The children send their love—they think you are in hospital ill—and hope you get better soon. Even though your hospital spells Holland, I hope you get better too.

Please don't bother to answer this letter, it's quite unnecessary, and better for all concerned that you don't.

Yours,

MARGARET.

P.S. If you have got into trouble over there, and want to come home, Father is prepared to send you ten pounds, for the children's sake.

Judging from his response to the letter it seemed that nothing could ruffle him. Her pompous recriminations made him grateful that she was hundreds of miles away, out of his reach, for when he recovered from the clasp of the drug he might well have gone to see her, with consequences which he

would regret. Even her attempt to humiliate him in that cruel postscript merely split his mouth in a wry smile.

As for her divorce, so much the better, the halter was irrecoverably slipped from his neck. A legal separation would have left untidy ends and certain responsibilities. Now—finished! He drained his glass in a rather sour celebration.

Margaret's claim that she knew nothing of his life in Holland he doubted. On leave Jan had written a number of letters and he had not destroyed them. And he knew Margaret well enough to know that she wouldn't hesitate to read them. He poured a second brandy and asked himself, for the first time, if he had left those opened letters about purposely. The rift had existed between them, but had he tried to widen it in this manner?

His meditations were interrupted by scratching sounds outside the door. Had the chambermaid returned after all, and was tapping on the panel in order to avoid waking the other guests? The notion in no way pleased him. The green capsules dissolving in his stomach were company enough, and would make no tedious demands upon him. Then the waiter, perhaps, to be quite certain he was no longer ill?

Barnes dropped his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. His knees buckled, and it was some moments before he was able to pull himself upright. His heart beat slowly, with unnatural strength, and his breath came in short gasps. Then he shuffled across the room and pulled open the door. A cat crouched back and regarded him with glowing eyes. When he leaned down to stroke it it leapt in the room and took refuge beneath the wash-basin. Barnes went back to bed, and after a little investigation the animal leapt up beside him and lay against him purring. Its little ferret eyes shone like twin reflectors. Its gesture of confidence in him by leaping on the bed was in no way confirmed by the malignancy in those unwavering green pupils. Like Margaret, he thought, one wrong move and she was ready to strike. Like Bea too, watching him

guardedly with the knife ready poised. But her knife had made its thrust and had pierced the life-blood artery upon which he and Jan had fed. There had been no staunching the precious flood, only a tourniquet to lessen the flow and give them a little more time before the death throes.

It had been Bea's treachery, of course, that had brought about the ultimatum. Treachery so far as Jan was concerned: he readily admitted that Bea owed him no allegiance. Yet as Jan lived within him it was treachery towards the One.

Barnes had had difficulty in reaching the heart of the matter, but in the end the Colonel (guilty of his innocent part in the matter) had given him the facts. Not only had Bea brought the alliance to the notice of the British authorities, but had persuaded her father to make complaints to the Dutch military authorities as well.

He did not tell Jan, preferring to let the facts emerge by themselves. She had implored him not to question the Colonel, so what was the point in revealing the fact that he had deceived her?

Bea could be made to fall into a trap, with the Prussian officer husband as the bait.

One morning, lying in bed with Jan, he had again brought up the question of inviting Bea and the Prussian gentleman for drinks in the Round House.

"It will only cause ill-feeling again, so what's the point?"

"To give the Prussian gentleman a little good champagne and some tasty grub. I doubt if he's had anything like that for a long time. You have to admit he's lived for a good number of years on a vinegar diet. Besides, he'd love to see you."

"Me!" Jan answered, "what good would seeing me do him?"

"You're nectar to Bea's vinegar, don't make any mistake about that. He adores you."

Jan's cheeks flushed and she removed her hand from inside his pyjama jacket. "Don't be absurd."

"It's true, *Liebling*. When he watches you he crosses his knees and avoids Bea's eyes like the plague."

It was true. The only time Christopher showed any interest in anything was when Jan entered his vision. Barnes had watched him at the last meeting. When she had bent down at the cocktail cupboard with her back towards him, Christopher had watched her intently and his Adam's apple had jerked tremulously. Then, with lids half lowered, he had darted a glance at Bea.

Jan poured them each a fresh cup of tea and the cups clattered thinly in her hand. "Christopher's always regarded me as Bea's little sister, David. I've often thought his paternal air a little uncomplimentary."

Barnes cradled her head in his arms and grinned at her. "The way he looks at your neat little bottom isn't what I'd call uncomplimentary. Though, mark you, I'd be a little incensed if he ignored it."

"What's caused *you* to wake up in such a good humour?" Jan asked, with her eyes turned away from him.

Barnes sat up. "I do believe you're rather pleased. Are you pleased, Jan?"

"Pleased about . . . what?"

"The Prussian gentleman's admiration for your posterior."

"For Heaven's sake stop it, David."

Barnes asked, "Have you had an affair with him?"

She jerked up on her elbow. Her jacket fell open and above her breasts a little pulse beat beneath the brown skin. "You make some despicable remarks, David. Because I let you love me doesn't mean to say that I make a practice of sleeping with my friends. Do you think I *need* sex?"

"Of course."

She clenched a fist and punched him on the chest. But she did not deny his allegation. Instead she said, "I've been faithful to you, anyway, which is more than I could expect if you got your hands on some other pretty woman."

"I don't doubt you've been faithful to me," Barnes said, "but is it so unnatural to think you may have felt the need to console Christopher before you met me?"

"Console him!" Her breasts rose and fell angrily. "What a revolting light to look at things in. It never even entered my mind that he was so unhappy with Bea till *you* put the thought there. And if it had? You think I would take him into my bed to *console* him?"

"Why not? He would have been grateful to you for ever, *Liebling*," Barnes said jokingly, "just as I am, eternally, eternally, *eternally*."

She jumped from the bed and slipped on her dressing-gown. "Why don't you get up and go back to your Mess? Perhaps the Colonel's looking for you. Go and talk with your dear Colonel. You might suggest to him that I sleep with anybody. That ought to rob our affair of any significance whatever. You might sow that seed in *Bea's* mind too, while you're about it."

"The Colonel's a shrewd man," Barnes said, "he'd probably see through that one. But Bea! That's another matter altogether. Do you think she'd believe it?"

She turned from the dressing-table with her hair-brush poised in her hand. "My God," she breathed, "I believe you would. I really believe you *would*."

A knock sounded on the door and the Dutch servant came in and said, "The children are ready for breakfast, Madame."

"All right, I'll be in directly."

In the early days Barnes had come to the Round House and had left just after dawn. Now, in the depth of their intimacy, they accepted the servant's knowledge as a matter of fact. She, however, was always uncomfortable in their presence, particularly when she carried their early morning tea into the bedroom. Now, as she nodded at her mistress, she avoided looking at Barnes and closed the door gently.

Barnes jumped to the floor and stretched his arms above his

head. "No, I wouldn't," he said, "I wouldn't play a trick like that on Bea, even though she's asked for it."

"Asked for it?" Jan repeated furiously. "What has she asked for? You've absolutely no proof that she's caused any trouble for us. Why don't you go back to your beastly dépôt and leave her alone?"

"I haven't touched her . . . yet," Barnes said, "though that doesn't mean I won't in the future."

"You think you could do anything to hurt her, h'm?"

"Not easily, no. Her sort of crust is practically untouchable."

Jan came to the foot of the bed with her hands clenched at her sides. "Why can't you understand that when you talk like that you hurt *me*? I've grown up with certain illusions about loyalty and I'm a bit proud of them. Do you want to eat right in and destroy them too?"

"What do you mean by 'them too'?"

"Because by making me love you in the way you have you've broken my faith in myself."

Barnes, in the act of pulling on his battle-dress trousers, said, "I don't follow that."

"Perhaps you couldn't."

"You might give me credit for understanding a little about how your mind works."

"What's the use of trying to explain? It's how one feels as much as what one thinks. But if you insist on knowing, it's because when I first met you, and let you sleep with me I wasn't in love with you. I admit I found you attractive and I admit my body was attracted too. But then it was only the fact that I liked being entertained by you, and I liked the luxuries you could give me—those parties, the drives in your car and the meals we had together in those restaurants we found all over the place. And naturally I was flattered that you should want me. After all, you British officers can get anybody you want at the moment. Pretty well any girl would give a lot to

be in my shoes." She bit her lips as though she were trying to heighten their colour. "It wasn't far off prostitution."

"Oh, God," Barnes groaned, "don't start dragging those melodramatic clichés out. A form of prostitution! You might just as well say that if a woman loves a man other than her husband, she is prostituting herself for his love."

"Perhaps she is."

"Then you're a prostitute," Barnes growled, "and I'm a gigolo living on your love. Let's settle by saying the pair of us are whores of a kind, and so what?"

"Certainly Bea would think so."

"To hell with Bea. I'm sick of that woman."

"What you say doesn't alter the fact that I've always sworn to myself that I'd never take a man if I truly didn't love him."

"You love me?"

"Now . . . not the first time."

"And Ruudolf?"

"Ruudolf was my husband. I owed it to him."

Barnes scratched his hair with both hands and yawned. "This is a fine time in the morning to launch out into an argument of this sort."

"It isn't an argument, David. You asked me to explain, and I have."

"Do we go on with this over breakfast?"

"I'm breakfasting with the children."

"All right, do, by all means."

"And you?"

"I'll finish dressing and have a bath in the Mess."

Jan came round the bed and touched his arm. "But you do understand, don't you?"

Barnes laughed, and took her in his arms. "Yes, I suppose I do. But I think your reasoning is a little off true. But . . . if it makes you happy, all well and good."

"You make me happy, David."

He rubbed his bristly chin against her face and said,

"Then invite Bea and the Prussian gentleman to have drinks next Wednesday."

"A moment ago Bea made you sick."

"So she does, but it's so nice when she's gone."

"You're impossible," she said. "You can make your way out as soon as I shut the dining-room door."

"Shall we have dinner and dance a bit at the Kurhaus tonight?"

"A bribe?"

"I'll bribe you when we get home," Barnes answered. At last she smiled and ran her hand lightly down his spine. "And what shall I bribe you with, h'm?"

"You don't have to be told," he said.

Rather to Barnes's surprise Bea accepted Jan's invitation. Either curiosity or a taste for NAAFI rations must be the motive, for it seemed impossible, in view of the Colonel's disclosure, that affection for Jan lay behind it.

Barnes had bought six bottles of Heidsieck and a bottle of cognac from the Mess. Jan had spent the afternoon preparing a knife-and-fork supper, and had put the final touches to it when a taxi pulled up outside.

"For my sake try and behave yourself," she said.

"She certainly has some gall, coming," Barnes answered. "I didn't think she would."

"Why not?"

"After last time," Barnes lied. The front door rang and Jan hurried out. He heard Bea's voice in the hall, "What a lovely surprise, dear. I can scarcely recall the last time you had one of these little gatherings. Christopher, you haven't paid the taxi, the man's waiting. And you might ask him to come back for us at ten."

Jan led the way into the lounge. "Do come in, David's here."

She looked lovely in her wine grosgrain cocktail dress and the sparkling necklace and little pearl-shaped ear-clips Barnes had given her in Brussels. Her appearance was unfair to Bea, dressed in ungainly folds of black taffeta and a black toque. Altogether she resembled an ancient crow with its ravaged nest upon its head.

"Come and sit by the stove," Barnes said. He nodded at Bea and shook Christopher's hand. Bea lowered herself into a chair with the caution of one expecting the bottom to drop out.

To his surprise Barnes noticed the Prussian gentleman seat himself by the table and proceed to roll a cigarette. He caught Barnes's eyes on him. "Rationing," he explained gloomily, and when Barnes hastened to offer him one of his own Bea said, "He prefers his own, thank you."

"And now, Bea, give us all your news," Jan said.

"Very little," Bea answered cautiously, trying, with her pinched nostrils, to smell out hidden traps. "You remember the van Deerlings? Well, they've gone off on a trip to America, though what for Heaven alone knows."

Barnes opened a bottle of wine and Jan handed round the glasses. "Does it matter why? I wouldn't hesitate to go, reason or no reason. That country has always held a fascination for me. The vast expanses, the wonderful contrast in climates—swimming one day and ski-ing two days later. And the throb, throb, throb of millions of people on the go all the time. It must *do* something to you. All that energy must have an exhilarating effect."

"Not to mention hire-purchase and gum-chewing," Bea replied. "For my part I prefer to rely on champagne for *my* exhilaration. And that sense of energy you mentioned brings to my mind perspiration under the arms and hot bodies. So unhygienic. We entertained quite a number of Americans in our house and found them to be *most* uncouth."

"I dare say the British give the same impression to some people," Barnes put in.

Bea gave him a meaning look and said, "Doubtless."

"I was about to add, my dear lady," Barnes answered, "that any expeditionary force of any nation often doesn't create the best of impressions. Understandably. There's a certain resentment towards them, you know. And individual rough-necks can prejudice the reputation of the mass. In England, for instance, I knew of one town that never ceased shouting their dislike of the Americans and all but cried when they left."

"I can't see myself crying *my* eyes out," Bea said, "and that goes for the Americans or the British."

"Oh, quite, quite. Crying is so exhausting, and at a certain age one must avoid exhaustion," Barnes said.

Jan hastily re-filled the glasses. The Prussian gentleman had succeeded in lighting his cigarette and particles of smouldering tobacco fell on his exquisitely cut suit. He said with unexpected courage, "Come now, Bea, we have some good American and British friends."

"I was meaning the type one could admit into one's most intimate circles, Christopher, not the casuals who came in for a drink, or played billiards with you in your precious *estaminets*."

"But I adore *estaminets*, darling," Jan said. "Do you mean to tell me Christopher doesn't take you?"

"I haven't any wish to go," Bea answered stiffly.

"You don't know what you're missing. David and I often spend an evening in one near here. A dear little place, with the sweetest red plush benches, and an old man who never stops playing the same three tunes on an accordion. And they serve better herring than you can get in the Hague, believe me."

Bea sniffed. "I'll take your word for it, but it seems a pity to waste your time there when you could be showing the Captain more important things. Have you taken him to the tulip fields yet?"

She was quite determined not to address Barnes by his name, signifying perhaps that officers beneath field rank were hardly acceptable in her *côterie*.

"Poor David suffers so from hay-fever, Bea, so it would be asking for trouble. Besides, one can see flowers anywhere, can't one?"

"You might take a *little* pride in our national assets, Jannie," Bea chided. "If the Captain were to take you to London I would expect him to show you Westminster Abbey and the Tower of London, at least."

"He will."

Bea stopped in the act of raising her glass to her mouth. "Will *what?*"

"Show me Westminster Abbey and the Tower of London—when we go there."

Bea half-closed her gimlet eyes. "*When you go there!* Well, really this is news. Even Rudolf had never given you such enchantment. A visit to London! And shall you take the children or leave them with us? Leave them with us if you'd care to."

Already she had made up her mind that they would go and that for the pair of them it would be the edge of the precipice.

"Jan will give you plenty of notice. And pay for the board of the children" Barnes said, "and perhaps send you a post-card or two of the Chamber of Horrors."

Jan found this too dangerous. "It's a dream, of course, like ski-ing, and lying on the beach at Miami."

The Prussian gentleman drained his glass. Barnes opened a second bottle.

"I hope you go one day, my dear," Christopher said to Jan. "We always wanted to travel, didn't we, Bea? But we never seemed to get around to it, what with the war, and so forth."

"Considering we've had to put up with nearly every nationality on our doorstep in the last few years," said Bea, "I'm very content to stay at home."

"It isn't the same, Bea," Jan said. "You have to come to know people in their own country. As David said, they don't behave abroad as they do at home."

"One would hope not."

"I've heard it said," Christopher surprisingly put in, "that the Americans are the only nation who have gone from savagery to decadence with no intervening period of civilisation. It might be true, they're such a young people. I wouldn't care to go there, I must say. But perhaps I'm a bit past it, what with soda-fountains and campus-kids and captains of industry."

"As there isn't one chance in a million of your going," Bea said, "I don't see that there's a lot of point in discussing it."

The Prussian gentleman hastily drained his glass again and withdrew from the conversation.

Bea asked, "Have you heard when Rudolf's coming home, Jannie? I was told another draft is expected to leave Holland to relieve them."

Barnes asked sharply, "How do you get to hear this sort of information, Bea?"

"Through friends, Captain," she replied airily. "One is always learning things, you know. Even when the Germans were here we managed to get news."

"The Germans aren't here now, but there's still a certain amount of security imposed and I think it's wiser that you keep this sort of information to yourself."

Jan had placed her glass on the table and was lighting a cigarette with trembling fingers. Both Barnes and the Prussian gentleman gave her a sideways look. The sudden quickening of the atmosphere was not lost on Bea. She rested her chin on her forefinger and thumb and said with satisfaction, "But it's fairly common knowledge, Captain, and it would be so nice for the children to have their father home again. Even the best of friends can't replace a father."

Jan asked, "Is it true, Bea?"

"So Colonel Herst says."

Jan picked up her glass and said, "Give me another, would you, David?"

"Colonel Herst?" Barnes asked. "And who is *he*, my dear Bea?"

"Something to do with troop movements. Usually a most reliable man . . . and so cultured . . . he really is an asset at their Mess parties. Just as you are, Captain. As I said last time, Christopher and I hope to give a dinner soon, and you must come along. You too, Jannie."

The telephone on the bureau jangled and Jan rose and

answered it. She glanced over her shoulder, "For you, David."

Barnes was surprised. He had never been phoned here before.

He took the receiver, with Jan standing at his side.

"Barnes here."

"David?" it was one of his brother officers from the Security Department. "Listen, chum, I'm so sorry to disturb you . . ."

"That's all right, Bob, what is it?"

"The Brigadier wants us all at his house at nine o'clock for drinks. Some big-wig flew in from the War Office at tea-time, and we all have to be presented, like sweet little debutantes."

"Listen, Bob, I'm already at a party. . . ."

"Can't be helped . . . it's an order. I'm Duty Officer tonight and I've been raking the crew in from all over the bloody Hague. Now be a good chap and get your skates on. Brigadier's house at nine."

Barnes said angrily, "Why can't they issue their orders at the right time . . ."

"I know, I know, but for God's sake don't let me down, David. I promised them I'd get hold of everybody."

"Just how long are we expected to stay there?"

"An hour or two." And he added brightly, "The old man will give us a slap-up supper. He knows how to lay things on when it doesn't touch his pocket. How's Jan?"

"She's fine, and I might add that we've got a perfectly good supper here. As a matter of interest, how did you find out this telephone number?"

"The adjutant got it from the Colonel, old boy. See you at nine, and give my love to your girl-friend."

Barnes frowned as he dropped the receiver back. So the Colonel had this phone number.

"Anything wrong?"

"I'm afraid I have to leave, Jan. It's nothing important to me but apparently it is to Brigade."

"Oh, darling, and all that food and drink."

"Stuff it down their necks and give the Prussian gentleman a basket to take home." He passed his hand over the back of her head.

"Will you be back tonight?"

"If I possibly can."

He went back to the centre of the room. "I'm sure you can have a pleasant little evening with Jan, Bea. I'm afraid I have to leave. Of course, had I known. . ."

"How unfortunate," Bea answered, "and we were having such a cordial time. But I quite understand."

"Another little morsel of information from your friend Colonel Herst? Or did you perhaps learn about it from the dépôt?"

"I don't quite follow you, Captain."

"I manage to get hold of juicy little tit-bits too, Bea. I hear, for instance, that you and my Colonel are quite good friends."

"I don't think I've ever met him. Have we, Christopher? Do we know the Captain's Commanding Officer?"

The Prussian officer swallowed a mouthful of nuts and shook his head.

"Then perhaps pen pals?"

"Really, Captain," Bea said stiffly, "I do wish you wouldn't talk in riddles."

"Do you?" Barnes asked. "You mean that?"

Bea held his steady glance for a moment, then dropped her eyes to her nails. "I detest innuendoes."

But her self-confidence was a little shaken.

Jan wrinkled her forehead. Not only had the party come to grief, but there was now a brittle undertone with the four of them waiting for something to snap.

Barnes filled his cigarette-case from the box, dropped it in his battle-dress pocket and said, "I believe you dropped him a nice little intimate note about the activities of a childhood friend of yours. He certainly wasn't interested, but he was

most concerned. Why don't you tell Jan about it, my dear Bea? And now good-night. Good-night, Christopher."

Jan went ahead of him to the door. He paused before going out. "Let me warn you, Bea, if you don't tell her, I will. Have a pleasant supper."

He waved as he swung the car down the avenue of plane-trees, the headlights casting spectacles of radiance ahead of him. He regretted leaving. He had pricked Bea's poison-sack and would like to have been there to squeeze it dry.

'But there's a saccharine taste to the sweetness of revenge; the sour underflavour comes out,' Barnes thought. He had derived only momentary pleasure from exposing Bea's treachery. An enmity had at once sprung up between Jan and Bea as a result. It had not been long before Bea had poisoned other of Jan's friends, and she and Barnes were more cut off than ever. So where had been the sweetness? A passing hour, then the tartness in the knowledge of the harm it had caused. But one pays for most emotions. Love, hate, fury, harmony, all demand their price and few give change, and driving between the plane-trees to the Round House a week or so later Barnes learned that the price he and Jan had to pay for their love, their fury, their tranquillity was almost an impossible one.

Even as he had sat in the car finishing his cigarette he had been uneasily aware that things were changed. A premonition touched him coldly. The trembling leaves, the wind in the grass, the evening blush of the sun, the flowers' scent—they none of them presented him with their customary little gift of peace. And the house was soundless. No children's voices, no welcome from her at the car's crunching halt on the gravel—nothing but the now hospital-look of the white-painted door. A premonition? Yes, the warm summer's air brushed him with a sense of chill. He left the car almost warily and jangled his keys as though willing Jan to come from the kitchen or lounge and rid him of this quivering uncertainty.

He opened the door with his key and went in the lounge. Except for a bird's shrill call the silence stood at his side like

an enemy. He went from room to room and found everything normal but for the persistent air of melancholy.

Frequently, in Jan's absence, he had waited for her with contentment, in anticipation of the night's fervour and peace, as though at home.

But now it was home no longer. The round lighthouse lounge was strange to him, like a room from which the furniture had been removed—too large, cold, robbed of intimacy. It reminded him of a lighthouse still, but a lighthouse around which the storm was gathering. The sense of remoteness remained, but a remoteness in which he existed alone, as though already Jan had gone.

He went into the kitchen and put the kettle on for a pot of tea. She hadn't gone, of course, not without seeing him or sending him a message, but something had departed. In a few minutes the kettle bubbled as it had bubbled on numerous occasions when he had made the morning tea and carried it back in the bedroom to find Jan sitting up and stretching and smiling her good-morning to him as he placed the tray down and climbed back beneath the sheets. •

He put the tea in the pot—'One for Jan, one for me and one for the pot,' then thought, 'One for me and one for the pot,' and in that thought the first terror of impending loneliness stole in and crouched on the border of his mind.

He poured out his tea and carried it into the lounge. The stove, with its fascia of flowered Delft tiles, was barely warm. Then she must have been gone some time. Why hadn't she telephoned him at the *depôt* as she usually did when she was going out in the evening? Then he realised that after learning of Bea's treachery the *depôt* must, in her mind, be associated with danger. And the hotel? He had received no message there either.

He lit a cigarette and drew on it deeply in order to calm himself. There was no use running amok before learning the real reason for her absence; after all, a mere premonition had

sparked off this anxiety, and premonitions were frequently wrong.

Restless, he prowled about the room, hoping for some sign to allay his fears. There was nothing; even the telephone pad was bare. He jammed some logs in the stove, then sat in Jan's chair and listened to the fire sucking at the damp wood. Up to the present his life in the Hague had been too occupied for musings of this kind. There were the Brigade meetings, the routine work in the dépôt, the Boards under his supervision for examining the integrity of Dutch military personnel, the outside visits to places such as the Scheveningen prison and the house of the doctor whose son had applied for a visa to England. Then there were the nights with Jan, the week-ends in Noordwijk and Brussels—a pattern which gave one little time to think, even of the future.

He supposed that unconsciously he must have felt a sense of insecurity after talking with the Colonel, but if he had it must have lain deep in his mind, stifled by the hundred and one pressures of each new day. Now, however, alone in the strangely silent place which was so dear to him, a kind of back-water beyond which life flowed by without touching them, the dam of his mind had diverted the flow—the hazards of an indeterminate future gushed in and swamped him. And, because of his early life—the crawl of death in his mother's paralysed body, his father's hopeless deterioration, his insane marriage to Margaret, the thunder of guns and the screams of friends dying—because of all these things he had set a high price on security; and to him security had meant Jan, even though he knew that, ironically, it was an insecure security.

The little china clock struck the hour of seven. What had she done with the children? And the maid, what had become of her? He lit a fresh cigarette from the stub of the old, then helped himself to a whisky and soda from the cupboard. The lowering sun shed its blood on the plane-trees and in a little while, as though already dead, fell behind them.

Barnes flicked through an old magazine, reading the advertisements. Out on the road a lorry ground by in low gear and a dog barked in defiance. Barnes rang the dépôt first, but there was no message for him; then he tried the hotel and received the same answer from the Mess sergeant. There was little point in driving back. He poured himself another whisky although it was unusual for him to drink more than one before dinner. His thoughts switched to Margaret and he smiled wryly when he considered how pleased he had always been to find *her* out on his return in the evening. He had enjoyed sitting by himself before the fire, reading, or going down to the pub for a game of darts. Nothing could have served as a better example of the frailty of their relationship. A book or a game of darts in preference to her company! She had made a point of going out, either with her parents or her girl-friends or to the cocktail parties from which he was finally excluded. The children had always been up in their beds, though, and he had often read to them, or played little games, hugging their company within him, reassuring himself, falsely, that something still remained. It was another of his failures that he couldn't keep the marriage going for their sakes. He supposed they still retained some affection for him, some memory of his reading to them, of his funny little games. But not love—certainly not that. Margaret had soon stifled their love for him with an oppressive, defiant kind of love of her own.

He stirred in his chair as a car approached the gate at the end of the drive, but it accelerated and drove on. He rang the hotel once more and asked for Bob Cartwright, the Captain who had summoned him from the party here to the Brigadier's house. In a minute Cartwright's deep voice answered. He sounded a little tight.

"Bob, it's Barnes here."

"Where the hell are you, chum? You're missing something here, I can tell you. A bunch of Yanks came in on their

way to Germany. There's some party going on, my lad."

"Never mind the party," Barnes said. "Has Jan been in this evening?"

"Haven't seen her."

"How long have you been back from the depôt?"

"Since five-thirty, old boy. These Americans have a crate of rye with them and popped the first bottle as soon as we got back. And they've got girls. Where they find popsies from so quickly is a bloody mystery. They've only been in the town since mid-day. And look at you and me, took us weeks to find ourselves. . . ."

"This is important, Bob. I'm trying to find out where Jan is."

"Try her house, dammit. Where do you expect the girl to be."

"I'm ringing from her house, you bloody fool."

Cartwright belched down the telephone. "I'm not such a fool as you think, chum. I've pinched a lovely little piece from one of the Yanks. She prefers me. *We're* staying in the Hague for years. The Yanks' move in the morning. She wants security, so she's chosen me."

Security! From a drunken colleague the word cropped up again. . . .

"Furthermore," Cartwright said in a slurred voice, "tonight the boot's on the other foot, brother Barnes. I have a piece of crumpet and you haven't. When you're alone and cold in the dark hours before the dawn, think of me. . . ."

"Listen, Cartwright, pull yourself together for a moment, will you?"

"What the hell. . . . I'm not drunk, chum. Pull myself together? What for? I've got my piece of tail by the tail. You pull *yourself* together."

"Forget it," Barnes said and slammed the receiver down. Then he lifted it and asked for the depôt number. He asked for the Orderly Officer. "Barnes here, Ellis. Can you find out

from the Orderly Room if there's been a call for me in the last half-hour?"

"Hang on a minute, old boy."

Barnes took a cigarette from his case and lighted it with one hand. The burning match dropped from his fingers to the floor. He hadn't realised how nervous he was until now—these 'phone calls, his irritation.

"Hullo, Barnes? A lady rang about fifteen minutes ago."

"Did she leave a message?"

"No, nor her name. Anything wrong?"

"No, no, I was just expecting a call, that's all."

"Where are you ringing from? The Mess?"

"A private house."

"What! Tonight?"

"Why not tonight?"

"There's a beat-up going on. Some American officers and their girls."

"I know, I know," Barnes said testily, "I've already been speaking to Cartwright."

"I wish to Christ I wasn't Orderly stooge."

"Bad luck," Barnes said and rang off.

Cartwright's words came back to him, '*When you're alone and cold in the dark hours before the dawn . . .*' For weeks, months now, when he awoke in the dark hours there was the warmth of Jan, the touch of her thigh, her soft breathing, her hand on his naked chest—the dawn then was no menace, it was the fore-runner of another precious day, a day which encircled safely the work he liked and Jan whom he loved. Now the vista of new dawns, of cold dark hours, and empty pointless days stretched before him with the pain of a limitless desert to a thirst-crazed man.

At a quarter to eight a taxi pulled up at the door and the shrill, excited voices of Jan's children burst into the room like a miracle.

Jan dropped her hand-bag on the chair, ran to Barnes and

laced her hands behind his neck. "Oh, David, I guessed you'd be here, waiting . . . and I tried to get you at the dépôt."

"I know," Barnes said. Now that she had come back relief swept in, and the doubts and fears of the black hour were behind him. "They told me you'd rung, or rather that a woman had rung," Barnes said angrily, "but why the hell didn't you leave your name, or a message at least? A woman had rung! What does that mean? Nothing, it could have been one of a dozen women."

"Let's not argue," Jan said. "I'm back, and surely that's all that matters."

"You might tell me where you've been." The possessiveness of his tone, when he had little claim to be possessive, angered him still further. "I've been hanging around here worrying like the devil and all you can say is that now your back nothing else matters."

She said, strangely calm, for usually she in turn would have flared back at him, "I must get the children to bed and give them some hot milk. Help yourself to a drink, David."

He knew the injustice of his truculence towards her—how many weary hours had she waited for him? When he had been detained at the office, or having drinks in some Dutch Mess, or playing billiards at one or other of the *estaminets* with some of the officers, how rarely she complained, but had a cheerful greeting or a sly, good-humoured dig at him!

By the time she came down he had cut sandwiches and brewed a pot of coffee. Her face was pale and she sank into a chair wearily.

"I'd rather have a Bols," she said.

When Barnes handed her the glass she took a sip, then sat twirling the stem in her fingers and staring fixedly into the open stove doors.

"Have a sandwich?"

"In a minute. I'm a little tired. The gin will buck me up a bit."

Barnes regretted his surliness but couldn't bring himself to voice his regrets, just as he found it difficult to voice his emotions. He doubted if he had told Jan of his love for her more than once since they had met; and that had been in the very early days when he had hoped, that by the use of such words, he would more easily be able to seduce her.

"A cigarette then?"

"Please."

He re-filled her glass and poured himself a cup of coffee.

At last she turned to him and said, "Bea was right, David."

"About what?"

"Relief forces sailing for the Far East."

Barnes was startled.

"What does that mean, exactly? That Rudolf might come home?"

"No."

"Then what? Why worry about troops sailing to Batavia. They're probably delighted to be going."

"Perhaps so, but *I'm* not delighted to be going."

Barnes laid his cup in its saucer. The quiet was so intense that it beat against the ear-drums. Overhead one of the children dropped something on the floor and in Barnes's ears it banged with the menace of a bomb.

"You're . . . not what. . . ?"

"Delighted to be going to Batavia."

"Are you mad, Jan?"

She drained her glass and held it out for more. "Nobody exactly suggested it, David. It's more or less an order."

"I can't mind-read," he answered. "What's an order?"

"The wives of officers serving in the Dutch East Indies are being shipped out there with this new draft. The Government say they're doing it for the brave husbands! The brave husbands! The troops here in Holland would like to have the time *they're* having."

"Surely they can't *order* you?"

Dutch military procedure so far as civilian relatives of serving forces was a mystery to him. He had never had reason to come into contact with it.

"Oh," she said, "they call it a chance to carry on the home-life. Promise first-class accommodation, increased allowances, all that kind of propaganda."

"And you'll go?"

She shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "What can I do? I've got to go."

Of course she had to go—she had not finally severed the cord between herself and Rudolf, as he had with Margaret.

"And when will you go?" he asked.

"David," she answered, "don't make it sound so . . . so conclusive."

"Well, it *is* conclusive. We can't bury our heads any longer. What were you doing this evening?"

The shock of her pronouncement was his anæsthetic. Later he would suffer; now he enquired the date of her departure as though he wished to jot it in his diary.

"We had to go to the Army Movement Office in the Hague," she said, "fill in forms, answer question after question. And a medical examination. The children have to be vaccinated . . . and me, of course. I scarcely remember what I did fill in."

She came and sat beside him on the settee and leaned her head on his shoulder. For the first time since he had known her the tears were brimming and falling. But she made no sound and her body scarcely moved.

"It had to happen," Barnes said, as though the inevitability was a comfort. "We knew it, darling, perhaps we should have prepared for it."

"How can one prepare for this sort of thing?" she said. "People say they prepare for the death of one they know is ill, but when death comes they aren't prepared, not really. The

shock's still there. Oh, what am I saying? I'm so confused, so . . . frightened."

He lifted her head to his and closed her eyes with his lips. "There's nothing to be frightened about, not if you think about it intelligently. You *know* your husband, you aren't sailing thousands of miles to a stranger. You reached a compromise with him, very well then, stick by it."

He was doing his best to give her strength, but who would give *him* strength when she had gone? She had a new life, a new country, fresh interests. And he?

She straightened up and touched her cheeks with her handkerchief. He passed her her glass and helped himself to more coffee. With her Italian-boy hair-cut, her big dark eyes, she looked like a child, defenceless, lost. Yet he knew her inner strength, her stubborn pride. If one of them was weak, it was he.

"Did they tell you when you'll sail?" he asked, and nodded his head at the room. "And what about this place?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, suddenly angry. "How can I think of those sorts of things when I've only just been *told* I'm going? You might as well ask what I'll do with you—sell you, take you with me in a cage? You're taking it so calmly, almost as a matter of course."

"It is a matter of course."

"Then for God's sake show *some* feeling, give me something to hold on to."

"What do you want me to say? Don't go? Tell the Army to go to hell, and Rudolf too? Pack your bags and bring the children to London with me?"

"Yes."

"You don't mean it. Or perhaps you do, at the moment. The shock's wearing off; you feel the pain beginning to creep in. It hasn't with me, yet, but when it does I'll probably have the same idea and fight to take you home with me. But it wouldn't work, Jan, and you know it. You'd be a stranger

over there, living outside the boundaries of their beastly proprieties."

"At least I'd be living with you."

"What on? What sort of future have I, after all? Certainly not the Army, and the kind of job I'll get won't support you and the children."

He knew the sort of life it would be, scrimping and economising, even in necessities. And Jan would be pilloried on their outraged standards.

She walked about the room switching on the lamps. Even now that they were there together the room had lost its magic. Already it seemed as though it were craftily changing its substance to suit the new tenants.

"Let's go out," Barnes said, "and forget this for an hour or two."

"We can't go out," she said. "The maid isn't here to look after the children. Besides, we can't forget it, or at least I can't," she added accusingly. "All I can do is to try and live with the future, and not forget the past."

She was standing near a table-lamp and the light shone up on her face. The corner of her left eye was twitching. Although separated by only a few yards, she looked utterly alone, with every proud little barrier collapsing about her. Suddenly the pain cradled his heart icily. He held out his arms to her and she came running over. "My God," he shouted, "what are we going to do, darling, what *can* we do?"

His shout sounded within them distantly, like a fading echo. They both knew they could do nothing. Life was now too big for them, a hideous enlargement which they could no longer see clearly.

CHAPTER 23

The Palace clock chimed twelve clear strokes across the dark Square and Barnes felt less inclined to sleep than ever. Certainly the drug had sedated him, for his nerves seemed dormant, as they did when he had drunk a bottle of brandy. The difference was that now he was clear-headed, curiously so, for when these pictures of the past flashed in his mind he felt that he could take their frame, turn them in the light and so observe their merest detail. For example, it might have been this night that he picked up the phone and heard Jan say quietly, "David, I've had my sailing orders."

So real was the voice that he glanced at the telephone as though expecting to find the receiver on the pillow by his ear.

He had said one word, "When?" and after a pause she had answered, "Twelve days from now."

"Where are you?"

"In the bar of the Palace Hotel."

"Come over here, Jan, to the Mess."

She asked, "Is it safe?" for recently they had been cautious in being seen too much together.

"What the hell does it matter?" he answered. "They can't put you on board in chains."

"But you?"

"When you've gone they'll forget about it. The Colonel in particular. He'll probably ask me up to his room for a drink and be damned relieved he hasn't us to worry about any more."

He went out on the pavement to wait for her. It was still terribly hot, without a breeze, and the men going home from the office carried their jackets over their arms. The girls wore

short-sleeved summer frocks and chatted like twittering birds as they went by, probably arranging to catch the tram for a swim at Scheveningen and eat their supper out on the beach.

Barnes cursed in fury. One of the best summers for many years, when he and Jan could have spent his leave in a hotel they knew right down on the beach.

She turned into the Square and ran towards him. She wore a close-fitting light frock and looked so cool that the sweat started out on his forehead.

"Let's go over to one of those tables out on the pavement," he said. "The Mess is packed and as hot as hell."

He ordered them a John Collins and frowned into the bright evening sun. "Twelve days . . . they haven't given you much time."

"It's better that way."

During the past few days they had both learned to hold the reins tightly. It had been either that or breaking off before she went. The alternative had given them the strength they needed.

The waiter put the tall glasses in front of them, frosted on the outsides with ice tinkling on the surface.

"What shall we do with them, David, these twelve days?"

"If I can manage three days out of my leave let's go down to Brussels. And when we get back you could take the children and live out at the hotel in Noordwijk for the rest of the time. I'd come out every evening and at the week-ends."

"We couldn't take the children," Jan said.

"Why not?"

"They might let things slip to Ruudolf."

"They will anyway."

She said, "Perhaps they could stay with my grandmother. They love visiting her . . . and . . . they aren't going to see her again for a long time."

She showed him the various clearance papers for herself and the children. They were to be on board ship at Rotterdam by

twelve noon on the fifteenth. And his leave started on the twentieth!

"Only five days before I start my two weeks' leave," he said.

"Where shall you spend it?"

"God knows. Maybe I shall keep on our room at Noordwijk."

She laid her hand over his on the table. "No, don't do that. I should hate to think of you being alone there. Give me some peace of mind on the ship, I couldn't bear imagining your going to the beach in the mornings and lying in the garden after lunch, then driving back to one of the clubs at Scheveningen for the evening."

"All right," he said, "I won't."

"Why don't you go home?"

"Home?"

"To England."

"Home is here," he said.

A jeep pulled nosily into the kerb and Cartwright slung his legs over the side.

"Billing and cooing again," he said reprovingly and dropped his brief-case on the pavement beside an empty chair. He sat down.

"Do sit down," Barnes said.

The sarcasm was wasted on him. "How are you, Jan, ducks? It's about time this son of a gun brought you along to this neck of the woods again."

Since his party with the Americans in the Mess Cartwright had adopted what he called 'their cute colloquialisms'.

"You've met our naturalised American, *Liebling*?" Barnes asked.

"Bob and I are old friends," Jan answered, "particularly since he told me the secret about the end of that party."

The end had indeed been hilarious. Tired of the Mess, the Americans, with their girl-friends and some of the British officers in tow, had gone to a night-club recommended by a

Dutchman they had met in the bar. At the club they had occupied three tables, bought champagne at an exorbitant price, only to find the place was a brothel.

"Oh that," Cartwright said airily. "We wanted to stay, but the girls put their foot down."

"I should think so," Jan said.

"But we've been back solo," Cartwright added. "It nearly" cost us a month's pay."

"It damned well serves you right," Barnes said. "You stole a perfectly nice little girl from the Yanks, so what do you want to waste your money there for?"

"A change is as good as a rest."

"Don't come boasting about your virility here, Bob," Barnes said. "You looked haggard three days after you met that girl."

"It's all very well for you to talk like that when Jan's here, David," Cartwright said. "I can't answer back."

"You say what you like, Bob, I'm a big girl now."

Cartwright ordered another round of drinks and searched frantically in his tunic pockets.

"Left your wallet in the office again?" Barnes asked.

"How did you guess? That clerk of mine's a careless bastard, he always lets me forget something."

"I'll pay," Barnes said with resignation, but Jan handed some notes to the waiter and said, "It's about time I paid."

"That's swell of you, Jan," Cartwright said. "I wish I could get me a dame with those ideas."

"How long are we going through this phase, Bob?" Barnes asked. "God help us if you have a party with the Chinese."

"It'll pass," Cartwright said. "The way I'm going with my girl I'll be speaking Dutch before you know it." He drained his glass. "You people coming in to dinner?"

"Would you like dinner in the Mess, Jan?" Barnes asked.

"It would be nice."

"We'll sit together," Cartwright said.

"But not just yet," Barnes said, "it's so damned hot. Give the air a chance to cool."

He signalled the waiter and stretched his legs out over the pavement.

"This is the way to drink," Cartwright said. "Imagine sitting out on the pavement in Piccadilly."

The evening sun laid its lacework over the grass between the trees in the centre of the Square. Trams ground along the tracks at the far end, and hundreds of cyclists pedalled out on their way towards the Ypenburg aerodrome. A man parked a barrow behind Cartwright's jeep and began selling raw herring smothered in onion-strips from the bed of chipped ice. His customers held their heads back, sucked in the strips of white flesh and smacked their lips appreciatively.

"There's one thing about the Dutch," Cartwright said, "they certainly let you know they're enjoying their food."

"Why not?" Jan said. "That's what food is for."

He blushed with confusion, "I say, old girl, I didn't mean anything discourteous."

"I know," Jan said and nodded at Barnes. "You want to hear what *he* calls us."

"Oh, him," Cartwright said affectionately. "Don't pay any attention to him, he never went to school to know any better."

Two limousines swept out of the Palace gates and passers-by stood at the curb and waved.

"Prince Bernhardt off on the toot," said Cartwright. "Some life, eh?"

"He can keep it," Barnes said.

"What? Plenty of money, world travel? I wouldn't say no. How about you, Jan?"

"She'll be seeing all the world she wants in a few weeks' time."

"Off on holiday?"

Jan answered uncertainly, "No . . . no, not on holiday."

. . . I'm going to Batavia."

"What on earth does one go to Batavia *for?*" Cartwright asked.

"Let's go in and have dinner," Barnes suggested. He led the way across the Square and Cartwright asked, "Where the devil are you going?"

"I don't feel like a Mess dinner tonight," Barnes said, and linked his arm through Jan's. "I'll treat you both to a blow-out at the Club, with champagne. That's the mood I'm in."

"Am I glad I turned up!" Cartwright said. He took Jan's other arm. "I know the most expensive dishes, Jan. Let's take him for a real ride."

When Cartwright went to the toilet Barnes said to Jan, "This is the best way to face it, darling. We mustn't be sad. Let's never remember we were sad with one another."

"Never, David. And you'll give me the champagne cork for luck, h'm?"

The first stomach pain attacked Barnes around one o'clock. He wanted to order himself a hot egg-nog and lace it with brandy, but he knew there would not be anybody available at that hour in the morning to prepare it. Instead, he had the brandy, and over some hundreds of miles from London came the ghostly voice of the doctor delivering his warnings, "*No alcohol, no fried foods, a light diet, frequent meals.*" Well, he wasn't eating fried foods!

With his second brandy he took one of the little white pills from the envelope, and compromised with the ghost by watering the brandy down.

After a little while the knife-edge of the pain became blunted a little, but the throbbing at the kept him awake as a toothache will. He tried to put it from his mind by concentrating on the future—Margaret's divorce (he thought of it as that. Somehow it seemed unconnected with him, like the divorce of a casual friend), de Groot, and the South of France on Mr van Dijk's money.

But his meditations on the future were soon exhausted. The thought that he would soon be an unmarried man failed to excite him. It had come too late. Instead of excitement he felt irritation, like a man who has missed an important train. It seemed as trivial as that, his new freedom, for what good could it do him now?

A sudden thrust of pain in his stomach brought him upright in bed and the sweat started out on his upper lip. Then it subsided again, as though satisfied that it had reminded him of its presence. He fell back on the pillow and wiped his upper

lip with the sheet. He wanted desperately to sleep but dare not turn the light off. Darkness frightened him, just as that slash of pain had touched him with fear. 'The darkest hour is that before the dawn,' he thought morosely, so his darkest hour was yet to come, and the only help available to meet it was brandy, his bitterest enemy.

Friend or enemy, he must have it, and he poured himself the last half-tumbler from the bottle, drank it down and lay back with his chest heaving.

Presently even the ache left him; alcohol had established a truce with his illness. He told himself that if he felt as comfortable in the morning he would get up and have breakfast and perhaps spend the day at Scheveningen. Or even take the bus out to Noordwijk. It would be amusing to see if the hotel owners recognised him after eleven years. He might stay the night there and return the next morning in time to meet de Groot for the trip to Amsterdam.

The cat rose, daintily turned two circles and settled down once more. A wind had risen and was moaning in the Square. The sound increased Bafnes's feeling of snugness, for with the windows closed and the fire burning the room was hot. He wondered if Margaret also lay awake, going over in her mind the decision she had taken and planning the new life ahead of her. And Jan, wherever she was in the world, did she sometimes wake in the middle of the night and brood over what might have been? How he would have liked Margaret's letter in his pocket in those last days in Noordwijk; he could have made the ultimate gesture in such a tangled love—divorce for divorce, and remarriage.

In the last few days, after their return from Brussels, they had considered a double divorce over and over again yet neither had the courage to take the first step.

"Perhaps," Jan had said, "if I can't stand it out there, if things become impossible, I'll come back and we can pick up the threads again."

"Can one ever pick up the threads?" he had asked. "I doubt it, it can't be quite the same, ever."

It was true. Once the break had been made it was impossible to repair it without leaving a weakness. When you returned to a place you had loved after many years it seemed smaller than you remembered, even insignificant, and you often found it hard to understand why it had meant so much to you. It was the same, he thought, with a human relationship. Absence and time wore the edge off and change did the final blunting.

"I owe it to him to go out there, David. He's a sensible man. Once he recognises the impossibility of a situation he's prepared to do something about it."

"Even to the extent of giving you the children?"

"No," she said, "he wouldn't do that. He'd fight for them. They are all he would have left."

"And you? Would you sacrifice them for us?"

They were on the beach at the time, with the sun splintering the water and the sea so calm that you could scarcely hear the little waves unrolling themselves on the sand. She looked out over the sea with her hands shading her eyes, as though seeking an answer where the blue sky was burned to copper on the flaming horizon.

"No," she admitted honestly, "I couldn't do it, and I wouldn't. What sort of life could I live if I lost them?"

"And mine?" he asked.

She leaned on her elbow in the hot sand and gazed at him, her dark eyes filled with wistfulness, looking younger than ever with her short hair shaped to her head by the salt water. "I can't answer that. I don't know how a man feels. I only know how a mother feels, and I couldn't live without them."

"People say they couldn't live without this and without that," he said, "but they do. It isn't that easy to die." He gazed at the curve of her cheek, at the brown skin upon which the water glistened. "I think now that I can't live without

you, but I'll go on living, damn it, or existing, or whatever you like to call it, and the years will mark me, and all this will be a story I told myself years back in a hot summer in Holland."

"And me?"

"You? Why, you'll be a contented grandmother with your grandchildren and children coming to see you at Christmas and perhaps, if you know them well enough—and I would never know mine that well—you might tell them of these days and the grandchildren will clap their hands and ask for another fairy story. It all sounds so simple and carefree said like that, but we've a lot to go through, a lot of pain to put up with before it becomes that way."

A group of children were splashing at the water's edge and calling to their parents up the beach. The gulls wheeled overhead, calling their plaintive call, and a dog tore along the sand, absurdly jumping up and snapping its teeth at the gulls.

Later they collected their things, changed in the hotel and drove to Scheveningen for lunch.

In the afternoon they would either have a drive or go back to the beach before changing once more for the dinner-dance at one or other of the big hotels. Time was running out quickly and they tried to ignore it, even tried to pretend that the return to the Hague would be merely the return from a short holiday, not the return to a ship, to the dreaded bustle of final departure.

Almost without their realising it the three days ran into three nights and on the morrow they would turn their backs on Noordwijk for the last time.

"We must leave early in the morning," Jan said at dinner. "The maid's started the packing, but I have so much to do myself."

"And so many people to see?"

She shook her head. "A few, not many. After all, what do they matter now?"

"You and Rudolf will be back some day. You're going to need those friends."

Neither of them used the long *u* in Rudolf's name now. The time for jokes was over.

"What do you want to do tonight," Barnes asked. "Go dancing?"

"No," she said, "let's have a walk along the beach and go to bed early, not waste the hours dancing."

The night was hot, even oppressive. Not even a breeze touched their faces as they walked arm in arm down to the dunes. A three-quarter moon lay a shaft of silver across the moving water and underfoot the sand was still hot from the day's sun. Distant splashes and laughter came from where holidaymakers were having a moonlight bathe, and Jan gripped Barnes's arm and said in a husky little voice, "They'll still be here tomorrow . . . when we've gone."

"Perhaps they're going too."

"No," she said, "not with that laughter. They're sitting safely on happiness, not sliding over its edge."

"We give thanks, O Lord, for what we have received," Barnes said.

"It's funny," Jan said, "after all this time I've never asked you if you believe in God, or what your religion is. Do you believe in God, David?"

"Not as you mean it."

"Then you haven't even that belief to hang on to."

"Have you?"

"I don't know," she said. "Once I did. Perhaps I still do, but not strongly enough for it to do me any good."

"Then you'll have to rely on yourself," he answered. "We both will, darling."

The night was so quiet it seemed impossible that months before they had stood here with the storm thundering and cracking overhead and the gale snatching the sand and hurling it in their faces. Then they had just begun the journey they

were now ending. If they could start it again, Barnes wondered, with the knowledge they had now, could they appreciate it more, mark more indelibly in their minds the moments of joy and passion and utter happiness?

The moonlight bathers ran up the beach and called to them a cheery good-night. From far out on the water came the deep hoot-hoot of a ship's siren, a sound of mystery, of men and women setting out for unknown places. On the ship lights and music and gaiety. The strange irresponsibility and excitement of ship-board life would go to their heads like champagne and none would know that far from the ship's side, on a dark beach, a couple heard the sound of their passing with fear and hopelessness.

Barnes felt Jan's hand tremble on his arm and he held her to him so tightly that she could scarcely draw breath. Then he released her and they walked back along the sandy road towards the glowing windows of the hotel.

Cranes hissed and clanked and motor trolleys with piled luggage chugged up and down the piers. Sirens hooted and were answered and tugs churned the grey water and the floating gulls rose and fell in their wakes.

The sun fell with eye-aching brilliancy on the ship's white side and the rows of passengers at the rails waved and called their last greetings to those left behind on the docks. The lines were cast off and gently the tugs took the strain. Inch by inch the great ship edged away from the concrete. Barnes saw her, a little apart from the other passengers, with one child on either side of her. She waved, and their small hands waved too. For a last second he saw her boyish Italian-cut hair, her sun-burned face and then the face wavered through his tears and she was gone.

He stopped at an *estaminet* on the drive back to the Mess and

drank a couple of cognacs. The numbness was giving way to misery, probably because after leaving the docks he had cried, and the crying had loosened his emotions up as exercise loosens the muscles.

Back at the Mess the sergeant handed him a small package. "It was delivered by hand a couple of hours ago, sir," he explained.

The writing was Jan's, and he put it in his pocket and went in the bar for another drink. Cartwright was there, and he called him on one side and said, "Let's go up the Square and have a drink at that café, Bob."

They sat down in the sunshine and Cartwright said, "What's it to be? John Collins?"

"No, thanks, a brandy and soda."

The usual streams of cyclists went by and the wheels of the cars made a ticking sound on the soft tar. To Barnes it might have been another square in another town, for in his eyes the life had gone out of it.

"You saw her off all right, David?" Cartwright asked and didn't look at him.

"If you could call it seeing anybody off. We neither of us said good-bye. She left the car with the children and went straight up the gangway."

"You didn't go on board?"

"No."

"The best way."

He lifted his glass and his arm brushed the package in his pocket. "The best way," he agreed. To have gone on board would have been to worry the aching tooth with his tongue.

"What now?" Cartwright asked, and he glanced across the table at his companion. Barnes's eyes were empty. They watched the passing men with their jackets over their arms, the girls in their bright frocks, but they registered nothing.

"Now?" Barnes repeated. "Parades, orderly officer's duties, inspections, food, drink, leave . . . the whole stupid bloody

rigmarole of living. What do you expect me to do, weep myself to death?"

"No, chum," Cartwright said, and glanced at the empty brandy glass, "nor drink yourself to death."

"No," Barnes said, "neither of them. Now I can behave as the Colonel expects a British officer to behave: an example to the men, a paragon of virtue to our dear friends the Dutch. Oh, yes, the Colonel can have no complaints about me now."

"Don't blame him," Cartwright said. Barnes had told him about the interview. "It isn't his fault."

"No," Barnes answered, "nor the Brigadier's, nor the Ambassador's. It's the System's fault, and you can't answer back to the System."

"Have another drink, then we'll go back and have a spot of lunch."

"I don't mind another drink, but you can count me out as far as lunch is concerned."

"You've got to eat, pal."

"You eat to keep your energy up. I've got the rest of the day off, remember? I don't need energy."

"Just as you like," Cartwright said, and ordered again. "Where are you spending your nice free afternoon?"

"In bed."

The flag hung limply on the Palace mast. Three planes in close formation flew low over the Square and the glasses on the table shivered.

"Bastards," Cartwright said. "They ought to put 'em on a charge."

The powerful roar of the engines echoed between the buildings and then was gone. People who had been staring up with open mouths came to life once more and continued walking. A jeep drove by with four officers who called out to them as it turned into the military car-park by the Mess.

"They're all turning up for food," Cartwright said, and added persuasively, "Let's go in and get it before the best goes."

"You carry on, Bob," Barnes said, "and come and join me here for a cognac after."

"All right," Cartwright said, and rose to his feet. He laid some notes on the table and said, "Pay the waiter for me, will you?"

"Forget it. It's my treat." He had said a similar thing at the same table, when? Only a week or so ago. Then Jan had been with them and they had crossed the Square for a champagne meal. Now the seat at his side was empty and Cartwright was going alone into the Mess for his meal.

"See you later, chum, and not too much brandy, or I'll have to carry you back."

Barnes watched him walk along the pavement and turn into the Mess. Tonight he would have his girl with him, his legacy from the Americans. There were no complications in *that* affair. She was, as Cartwright said, a nice popsy, good for a tumble in bed and an amusing partner to take round the clubs. It would have been better if he had found himself one, then there would have been none of this emptiness and desolation, no reason for drinking brandy by himself out on the pavement here and not going in for his lunch.

The waiter came and removed the empty glasses and Barnes ordered himself another drink. Then he took the package from his pocket, opened the wrapping and removed the blue box. Inside it, on a layer of velvet, lay a gold cigarette-case. It weighed heavily in his hands in spite of its slimness, and when he unfastened it the initials *D* and *S* were engraved in the top left-hand corner, nothing more.

He made to screw up the wrapping-paper and found an envelope inside. He slit it open and withdrew the sheets. The sight of her handwriting was like a message from the dead.

MY DARLING DAVID,

When you receive this I shall be gone, but please don't be sad, because what we've had nobody can take away, and if

we are careful we can keep the memory of it and turn it over from time to time, and feel happy that we had such true love for one another. As I write this I can see the wake of the ship like a road that leads back to you. If only I could take it!

What we have done may be wrong to some people, but God knows we've surely atoned for it by this parting. When I saw you down on the dock as the ship moved away I thought my heart would break, and when the ship steamed over the water I thought of you driving back to the Hague alone, my darling, just as I am alone in spite of all these people. In fact they make me feel more alone, for most of them are eager to reach their husbands, and their happiness cuts me off from them.

Darling, if you could manage it, go back to Margaret. I ask you this because I don't want you to go on alone, it frightens me to think of it. I have my children, and Rudolf doesn't matter one way or the other. You could have yours, and Margaret needn't matter either. . . .

'I shall try and go back to her,' he told himself. 'What else is there to do?'

. . . I've seen how you can shut yourself off, David, so that nobody can get to you, you've done it with me many times. Well, shut yourself off from her but be with the children. Cling to them and love them and they will surely be some reward.

You told me on that last night at Noordwijk that you would never tell her about us and I think you are right. I shall never tell Rudolf either, for it would be opening my heart and letting a stranger in to touch the things that belong to you and me alone. How long do you think we can keep them, David, before what you call the bitch of Time takes them from us and throws them away?

Another favour I ask is that you don't go to the Round House again alone. You have the key still, but don't use it, darling. Don't take the chance of looking at it because it will not be the same.

How well he knew the truth of what she said, remembering the afternoon when he had waited for her, when the atmosphere of the room had changed and it had felt as though the house were already in the hands of a stranger.

As I sit on deck here, wondering how to end this letter I feel sure you will be seated at a table outside our café, having a drink and wondering what you are going to do. Of course, you will have my handwriting in front of your eyes now and so, my darling, I send you for the last time all the love I have. You have given me greater happiness than I ever knew I could experience. It burns in me and warms me on this awful journey.

Oh, darling, I can't write any more, and I will never write again, never, you understand that. Remember what we've had as long as ever you can, and for my sake, darling, don't be alone for too long.

JAN.

It might just as well have been a message from the dead for she was beyond his reach now, not only by water, but by irrevocable decision. He saw now that she had needed to be away from him to summon her reserves of strength. Had he pressed her to stay on that last night at Noordwijk she might have yielded. Now, if for some reason the ship returned it would make no difference. No pressure he could exert would prevent her from being on board again when it sailed.

He paid the waiter, tore the letter into small pieces and threw it in the ash-tray. Then he walked listlessly in the sunlight towards the Mess and his bedroom.

He dreamed he was on the boat-deck in the gale, the boards sliding at insane angles beneath his feet as the bows climbed the walls of lashing water. Rudolf had his hands about his throat, was forcing him inch by inch over the rails and the frothing waves broke over their heads so that their chests heaved against each other as they fought for breath. And as he was going over, over into the racing sea, through the thundering gale, de Groot slid along the deck in his green overcoat and tugged Rudolf's arm, screaming, '*No, no, no, no, we need him in Amsterdam, he's wanted by my chief in Amsterdam,*' and as Rudolf released him and he fell to the deck de Groot kicked him again and again in the stomach, screaming once more, '*Come to Amsterdam, you're ruining me, you're ruining me, ruining me. . . .*'

Then he lay holding his stomach and twisting his head from side to side on the pillow as though still dreaming, but his dreaming was over. He knew that the drug had sent him to sleep but that now sleep had deserted him and the knowledge was a sort of pulsating dread crouching behind his aching eyeballs. When he pressed his fingers to his eyes the dread slid to his heart and stomach and writhed coldly against the walls of his bowels.

In those first moments of dawn wakefulness, with his nerves juddering, Barnes attempted to paint for himself a picture of security. He imagined, for example, that the warmth of the bed might quiet his racked body, that the isolation of this bedroom on the second floor would protect him from the dangers of the world so close about him. The trouble was, the picture never formed. A vague pattern slid before his mind's eye, only to crumble before his senses could analyse it, its jig-

saw edges cutting a tangle of agonising light in the darkness.

He stood it for a while, then jerked up in bed and pulled the light-cord behind him. The bedclothes were on the floor and his pyjamas were soaked with his acid perspiration. The empty brandy bottle stood on the bedside table, and beside it the last tablet the doctor had left for him.

All he remembered of the dream was his lying in the cold and the harsh kicks in the stomach, and as though he were in that dream-world again great tearing pains enveloped him and he clasped his arms over his abdomen and lay doubled like a question-mark on the mattress.

The wind had risen to gale force and tore ferociously between the buildings in the Square. The window-frames shook beneath its force. Somewhere nearby roof-tiles crashed on the pavement below. Barnes didn't notice it. All that concerned him was the ache in his eyes like a migraine, the agony in his stomach and the big nerve which pulsed so wildly there. He retched dryly and tasted the chemical aftermath taste of the drugs.

In his agony he thought wildly, 'What was I dreaming, what was I dreaming? What was I thinking about before I went to sleep?'

Then he remembered—Jan, the ship, her last letter, how she had wanted him to go back to Margaret, his children. He had tried, he had tried, he had gone back to her for Jan's sake, for his own sake and for Margaret's and for the children, but it had not worked, it couldn't have worked. . . .

In those years after the war, without Jan he had drifted and made Margaret (who had not married again) drift with him, lower and lower. A friend had said, "You're dragging her down, David. Why don't you let her go while there's still time? If you've got any decent feelings left, let her go and take the children with her, let her go." But he couldn't let the children go, not at that time—those two divine lives which meant so much to him, just as he seemed to mean nothing to

them, registered nothing with them other than their frightened little smiles and expressions of relief when he took down his hat and coat and left for the office. Yet he had loved them with every fibre of his being, and felt horribly the bruise of their unsure smiles and the way they hid behind their mother when he made to go near them. A sudden recollection of their innocence returned to him, and he smelt again the sweet odour of the bathroom after their baths, saw them in night-clothes playing with some broken toy which they treasured, and the old tight feeling clutched at his heart. His feelings for them made him grin in hatred of himself and caused the sweat to break out again on his face and chest.

In the end he *had* let them go, the three of them, and he had been alone, just as now he was alone. In spite of Jan, in spite of himself, he had let them go.

Ah, Jan, Jan, Noordwijk and the gale which had thundered as it thundered now, and he had held her tightly, and in the fury of the thunder and the tearing lightning they had been secure together. . . .

Like the slash of lightning through the black storm-cloud the agony now slashed at the walls of his stomach, cut into his very being. He rolled over on the bed and arched his back, desperately searching for some little relief. He knew fear now. He had never known pain such as this before, had never known that a man could bear such swamping waves of agony.

Down in the Square a tree-branch cracked in the gale like a pistol shot. Barnes's eyes were fixed on the ceiling which seemed at one moment to descend upon him, and at the next to go swirling away into dark heights beyond his vision. The lamp shone on his unshaved cheeks, hollow with exhaustion, and on the dark creases in the skin between nostrils and mouth. His eyes closed for a moment and the muscles in his neck relaxed like an opening hand. Then he jerked in the bed, arched his back higher and higher, trying to beat the pain, to crease it out of him. His head lay back on the pillow, his

mouth open as if to shout. He jerked once more, then the blood filled his mouth and nostrils, trembled on their edges like rain on the tip of a leaf, before spilling down his neck to the pillow beneath.

Again the gale grasped the windows and rattled them. Under the bed the cat crouched, filled with a terrible unknown fear.

de Groot left Amsterdam well before breakfast time. He was taking no chances with Barnes. He knew only too well that after a few brandies he might slip from the hotel and evade him. It seemed so absurd, this evasion, when all they wanted to do was give him a job to do and pay him good money. de Groot shook his head with disgust. Why employ Barnes when they could employ *him*? After all, he was reliable, a faithful servant, he had proved that time and again.

The gale which had sprung up overnight was still blowing and it shrilled now through the cracked windows of the old Fiat. Frozen banks of snow lay on either side of the road and de Groot knew, from the colour of the sky, that when the gale dropped it would snow again.

He wanted to catch Barnes by ten o'clock and set out on the return journey to Amsterdam by mid-day at the latest. If they were held up in a snowstorm! de Groot didn't even like to think of it. Mister van Dijk had been very expressive when he had said good-bye to him the evening before.

It was still early when he turned into the Square. As on his previous visit he parked the car near the hotel and walked back to the cafe with its cracked sign advertising hot *croissants* and coffee.

The same girl was on duty. She recognised de Groot and gave him a hostile look.

"A hot roll and coffee . . . and a cognac if the patron happens to have opened the spirit cupboard this time." de Groot had a memory too.

Across the Square a man was scraping the icy surface of the hotel steps, and a telegraph boy jumped from his bicycle and

made an obscene gesture at him as he ran in. As he ate his roll and sipped the steaming coffee, de Groot listened with anxious ears for any slackening of the wind; his eyes, fixed on the hotel steps, were equally anxious. He was filled with little fears this morning—slipping on the ice, finding Barnes drunk, banging his car, going home to his wife in the evening, even of blistering his mouth on that damned coffee.

“Anything else?” the girl asked him.

“Bring me another cognac. I deserve it, my girl. I’ve been driving up from Amsterdam while you were lying in your warm bed.”

“Why complain to me?” she asked. “I didn’t ask you to drive up.”

de Groot scowled. She wouldn’t answer Mister van Dijk back in that manner. Or even Barnes, drunk or sober. They wore a certain importance like a badge. He wore genteel poverty with a hang-dog pride and sluts like this thought themselves good enough to insult him.

“Fetch me the cognac and don’t waste your time talking,” he said. “And heat this coffee up, it’s stone cold.”

It was in fact too hot to drink, but he needed his triumphs as Barnes needed his brandy.

“It’s just off the boil,” the girl said, “and I have this place to sweep out.”

de Groot glanced at the swelling outline of her breasts. “All right, leave the coffee,” he said, and showed his yellow teeth in a smile, “but I’ll have the cognac, just the same.”

She went out behind the counter and returned in a moment or two with his glass. She had neat ankles, he noticed, and a good thick waist. De Groot had no time for ‘a waif of a girl’, as he put it. He liked substance, value for money. With his insignificant stature the possession of a big woman was yet another triumph.

She banged the glass down and started sweeping beneath the tables. de Groot eyed her over the rim of his cup as she

bent down. He would have to come back here when he had time and a little money. Perhaps when he returned Barnes to his hotel. He would take her out to one of the cheaper clubs at Scheveningen and fill her with gin. His past failures in this sort of adventure he blotted from his mind. If he could get Barnes to van Dijk at Amsterdam, he could certainly get this girl to Scheveningen.

"How much, my dear?" he called. "And take a drink for yourself."

"I don't drink," she answered coldly.

"For later, then. Take the price and buy a little something for yourself later." He handed her some notes and drained his glass. "I'll be back in a day or two. How about coming out to Scheveningen for an evening, eh? I know the best clubs. We could have a good time, you and I. I come here on business quite often, you understand, so it wouldn't only be once. We could do it quite often."

She eyed the greasy hat and his black-tipped finger-nails as he held out his hand for the change. "No, thanks," she said.

"Ah, don't be silly, a girl like you needs a bit of fun."

She sniffed. "Not with you, I don't."

"We'll see, we'll see," de Groot said, and looked at his change. "Did you take for your little drink?"

"Buy yourself some moth-killer for that collar," she said, and picked up her broom.

de Groot snarled, "Bitch!" and slammed his way out of the door. He crossed the Square and snapped at the man cleaning the hotel steps, "Let me pass."

The vestibule had the same expensive air of quiet which had embarrassed him on previous occasions. He felt the old feelings of envy as he trod the thick blue carpet to the porter's desk. If he had been given the job they were offering Barnes, he might have afforded a place like this for a couple of nights, then girls like the one in the café could go to hell so far as he was concerned.

"Mister Barnes, please," he asked the porter.

"I regret . . ." the porter began haughtily, but de Groot interrupted him.

"Don't tell me he isn't in. I happen to know he is. I have an appointment with him, one of importance, and he's expecting me. Kindly ring his room. Tell him I'm here. de Groot is the name."

"You'll have to see the manager," the porter answered. "All requests for Mister Barnes go to the manager."

De Groot looked at him with suspicion. "Why? Why can't you ring the room?"

"It isn't my business," the porter answered icily, "to query the manager's orders. If you would wait a moment . . ."

de Groot sat down in one of the arm-chairs and glowered at the guests leaving the dining-room. A woman in a mink coat passed him and he pointedly picked his nose and derived satisfaction when she turned away in distaste. A man with a small black bag hurried from the lift and de Groot caught the faint odour of disinfectant. 'A doctor,' he thought, and curled his lips. 'One of these bitches down with indigestion and spending twenty guilders on a doctor! I hope they poison themselves.'

"The manager will see you now," the porter said, and pointed in the direction of his door. de Groot knocked and went in.

"Good morning," the manager said. "I understand you were asking after Meinheer Barnes?"

de Groot was not invited to sit down. The broad leather-topped desk, the arm-chairs and the expensive furnishings were not for him, he thought viciously; he was an intruder, a nuisance, something to be got out of the way as quickly as possible.

"You're quite right. I was asking for Meinheer Barnes. On a matter of private and important business."

"He was expecting you?"

"Of course."

"You are a . . ." The manager glanced at de Groot's green-black coat, the greasy hat and the diseased fur collar, ". . . a business acquaintance, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"But not a . . ." Again he paused, as though what he was about to suggest was like telling a dirty joke at the top of his voice in the dining-room, ". . . a relative, or friend?"

"I told the porter, and now I am telling you," de Groot said aggressively, "I came here at the invitation of Meinheer Barnes on the most important business. I demand to see him."

"He is not available."

"Why not?"

"He is . . . unwell."

de Groot's heart fell. Not influenza again, he prayed, not influenza, Van Dijk would never swallow that story a second time.

"Pouff." He waved his hand. "He had a cold when I was here two days ago, nothing more than that. He told me he would be well enough to travel back to Amsterdam with me today. Perhaps if you could lend him a travelling-rug for the journey. . . ."

"I'm afraid not."

"Look here," de Groot said, and banged the desk, "you have no right whatever to prevent me from seeing one of your guests. Let me remind you that you're only the manager. My colleagues in Amsterdam will have something to say to your owners, something you won't like, let me tell you that. . . ."

"Keep calm, keep calm," the manager answered. "If Meinheer Barnes were well enough, you would certainly be allowed to see him. As it is . . ." he shrugged his beautifully tailored shoulders, ". . . I am afraid it is quite impossible." He paused and looked fixedly at de Groot. "You are merely a business acquaintance?"

"My company has business to discuss with him, which isn't any business of yours."

The manager pressed a bell. A porter came in and the manager said, "Show this gentleman out," and added, to de Groot, "I very much regret to tell you that Meinheer Barnes is . . . dead."

de Groot's lips fell open and behind his spectacles his eyes opened and closed as though he had grit in them. "*What did you say?*"

"I'm afraid it is true. He apparently had suffered from an internal illness for some time. I am very sorry. . . ."

de Groot's face tightened as though he were about to cry. He drew a deep breath and looked at the manager with hatred.

"F——him!" he shouted, pushed the waiter on one side and ran through the vestibule to the hotel entrance. He didn't stop running until he dropped behind the wheel of his car breathless.

He wanted to scream, to push his puny fist through the old, starred windscreen. Dead! He would be blamed for that, of course! There was no getting away from it, Barnes's death would be his fault: either for not having got him to Amsterdam the week before, or for having given him the brandy.

He wrenched the starter and drove crazily round the Square. The wind was still gusting away and there was no sign of snow. There was no flag on the Palace mast and the great wrought-iron gates were open.

As he swung the wheel in the direction of the Amsterdam road de Groot cursed obscenely under his breath. Then, aloud, he shouted, "Dying on me like that, the bastard, the bastard!"

He shouted with feeling, for Barnes's death was in a way his own death too.

Epsom. February 1957—May 1959.

